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# UNIT 17 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDIA: AS FACT AND VALUE

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## 17.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit, you will be able to

- understand what religious pluralism means
- explain religious pluralism in India as a fact with special reference to its geographical spread; relationship between religion and sect, caste and religion and language and religious pluralism
- discuss religious pluralism as value with reference to social identity of religious groups, religious pluralism and persistence of shared values among people of various religion and finally, religious beliefs and rituals.

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## 17.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Block, Block 3 **Religion and Related Aspects** you have learnt about such aspects of religion as the religious organisations, religious specialists, religion and its relationship with social stability and change in societies. You also learnt about religious fundamentalism through case studies and the concept of secularism and about the processes of secularisation. All these aspects you learnt at the global level.

In this unit you will learn what one means by religious pluralism in Indian society. How it exists in factual terms and how far each religious faith bears some commonalities with many other religions that exist in our society? You will learn that religious pluralism in India is not only a matter of fact, but it also permeates through beliefs, values and social character of individual religions in India. However, religious pluralism as fact and as value are so closely interlinked that in reality it is difficult to separate the two. It is for the purpose of maintaining the clarity of the unit, as well as, explaining the two dimensions of religious pluralism in India that we first explain to you the factual side of religious pluralism and then the value dimension.

In this unit Section 17.2 explains the meaning of religious pluralism. Section 17.3 provides a detailed description of religious pluralism as fact. Section 17.4 outlines the

various aspects of religious pluralism as value and finally, Section 17.5 gives the summary of the unit.

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## 17.2 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDIA

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Indian society is composed of diverse cultures, and peoples, languages and religions. To examine the nature of diversity of the religious faiths in our country we must look at the historical antecedents of various religious groups found in our society.

Diversity of religious faiths has existed over a very long period of time as India has been a country of not only very ancient history but also a place where communities from outside continually kept on coming and settling down. Together with diverse cultural groups in various religions in India pursuing their faiths, these immigrant communities also brought their own religious faiths, customs and cultures. This resulted in bringing together people following different religions and gradually laid the basis of religious pluralism in India. Religious pluralism means diversity among people based on their varied kinds of religious beliefs. Pluralism of religion has thus two connotations:

- i) it refers to the fact that India has been a land of not one but many religions since ancient times; and
- ii) that each religion contains, besides its primary features which define its essence many cultural, social and ritualistic elements which cut across boundaries of different religions faiths. These cultural and social similarities are a product of interaction and accommodation established over a long period of time by regional, linguistic, ritual and social proximity of various religious groups. Religious pluralism in India is, thus not only a fact but it also permeates through beliefs, values and social character of individual religions in India.

You will study religious pluralism in India in the context of:

- a) distribution of religions in India on the basis of numerical, regional and linguistic categories.
- b) differentiation within a particular religion on the basis of sects or denominations;
- c) social differentiation within a religion on the basis of caste or caste-like divisions and
- d) shared cultural values by different religions on the basis of historical links, ecological and economic demands, linguistic and cultural commonalities and processes of migration.

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## 17.3 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS FACT

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Since ancient times India has been a land of diverse cultural groups professing many faiths. It was also a land where continual migration of people of varying ethnicity and religion from outside took place. It led to occasional conflicts of short durations during the process of accommodation and integration. But finally a veritable adjustment of people professing different religious faiths did take place. This contributed to the existence of religious pluralism as a fact in India.

Over a period of time people of various religious faiths settled down in India. Due to commonalities of shared geography, common of inter-dependent economic relationship and shared neighbourhood in the rural and urban settlements they developed many common or shared elements of culture traits and belief systems

despite professing different religions. People changed their membership from one religion to another due to conversions sometimes forced sometimes voluntary. However, in most cases they did not shed off all cultural and social practices or even beliefs or values they had held earlier. Yet their identify as a separate religious group was recognised. This reinforced religious pluralism in India.

India is the home of a majority of the religions of the world, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and so on. The state in India has functioned under the benign guidance and control of religion, and religions or even various religions have received patronage and protection from the state during large parts of Indian history.

Religious pluralism is thus, keynote of Indian culture and religious tolerance is the very foundation of Indian secularism. Religious secularism is based on the belief that all religions are equally good and that they all lead to the same goal of realisation of God. According to S.R. Bhatt (192: 261-271) religious pluralism leading to secularism stands for a complex interpretative process in which there is transcendence of religion and yet there is a unification of multiple religions. It forms a bridge between religions in a multi-religious society which enables each to cross over the barriers of their diversity. This is the main feature of what is called religious pluralism. In this section you will learn about the facts of diversity of religions in India. The census records give us an account of various religions, their numerical, demographic and social features. The most exhaustive and sociologically comprehensive census in India was conducted in 1931 when India was not divided into two countries, India and Pakistan. Kingsley Davis has analysed the demographic and social features of religions in the un-divided India in his book **The Population of India and Pakistan** (1951). Among the religions which are listed in the 1931 census are: Hindu, Muslim, Tribal, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi and Jewish religions. According to 1981 census the major religions as listed above had the following population: 82.64 percent (550 million) Hindus: 11.35 percent (76 million) Muslims: 2.43 percent (16 million) Christians: 1.6 percent (13 million) Sikhs: 0.71 percent (5 million) Buddhists: 0.48 percent (72,000) Parsis or Zoroastrians and 18,000 Jews, Tribal communities listed outside Hinduism or Christianity were listed as "others" and constituted 0.42 percent of the total population.

You would thus observe that factually India comprises the world's most important religions comprising its people. Moreover, it has on its land a diversity of religious communities settled over very periods of time. For instance, Islam came to India as far back as 650 A.D. and spread to the Western parts of India. It began to take hold in India after 1000 A.D. and expanded considerably under the successive Muslim dynasties. Similarly, Christianity came to India many centuries prior to the coming of the British or the Portuguese. An off-shot of the Mesopotamian Christian church existed in India's South-Western part even as early as the 3rd century, and was later on spread by the Portuguese during the 16th century. The Parsis or Zoroastrians migrated to India after Persia was conquered by the followers of Islam. They settled down in Gujarat and came to be known in India as "Parsis".

#### Box 17.01

Zoroastrianism—Zoroastrianism; the religion of the Parsis, is one of the most ancient religions in the world. It takes its name from Zarasthustra (Zoroaster) who probably lived around the beginning of the first millennium B.C. It has a history of about three thousand years. It is the most important religion of ancient, pre-Islamic Iran. Its origins can be located in the eastern Iranian, tribal, and basically pastoral society. Zoroastrianism is also known as Mazdaism, a word which is derived from the name of this religions' Supreme God, Mazda (or "wise"), or Ahura Mazda. The Parsis in India came to Diu Coast around 766 A.D. But these Zoroastrians abandoned this

place and took refuge in Gujarat. In India the population of the Parsis has varied between 80,000 and 82,000 as evident from the population census between 1881-1981. At present the Parsi community in India is settled mainly in Maharashtra and specially in Bombay, Gujarat and Deccan. (For more details on their social organisation you may read unit 19 of Block 4, course ESO-02 Society in India).

Jews are yet another religious community which has had a very exclusive character. They have been living in India for centuries and have maintained their native traditions. They are a very small group in India. The 1981 census reports the presence of only 18,000 Jews in India.

#### Box 17.2

##### Jews in India

“Judaism”, the religion of the Jews has a long history. In India we find two kinds of Jews (i) the Cochin Jews, and (ii) the Bene Israel Jews. Both these kinds are further divided into “Black” Jews and the “White” Jews. Legend, as believed by the Jews in India, has it that their earliest ancestors arrived in India after the destruction of the second Temple of Jerusalem during the time of King Solomon.

The Jews of Cochin trace their origins in India from about 1000 C.E. The Jewish traveller Binyamin of Tudela in his accounts reports the presence of a thousand Black Jews on the Malabar Coast in 1170 who according to him were “good men, observed the Law, possessed the Torah of Moses, the Prophets, and had some knowledge of the Talmud and the halakhah”.

From Moses Pereria de Paivos (Amsterdam 1687) account we come to learn that there was a synagogue (religious place of the Jews) with a total membership of 465 households of White Jews who had come to Cochin from such places as Cranganore, Castile, Algiers, Jerusalem, and so on. The Black Jews appear to have arrived in India earlier than the Whites and since they intermingled with Indian women, they acquired the dark complexion. Both these Jews, Black and White who came later, did not intermix, strict endogamy was followed by both of them. The influence of caste system can be seen in these communities. They prayed in different synagogues. Black Jews did not count in the minyan (quaran of ten adult men) of the White Jews, and vice versa. The segregation between them was such that the Kohima or the priest of the Black Jews did not serve the White Jews. David G. Mandelbaum (1939), an anthropologist, studies the Jews of Cochin in 1937, and he states that the lives of the Black Jews were “even more synagogue centred” than those of the White Jews. In 1948 there were 2,500 Black and 100 White Cochin Jews in India. However, since then all the Black Jews have emigrated to Israel, while most of the White Jews remained, since they could not take their assets out of the country.

The Bene Israel Jews are the largest Jewish group in India. They explain their name to stand for “Children of Israel”, referring to the ten tribes of Israel that seceded from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Their legends speak of a shipwreck off the Konkan coast in which only seven Hebrew couples survived. They were cast ashore and settled in the village of Nawgaon, about 26 miles south of present day Bombay. They were isolated from the co-religionists for such a long time that they forgot their Hebrew language and adopted the language (Marathi), customs, dress and even names of their Hindu neighbours.

However, they did not give up observing circumcision, dietary laws, the Sabbath, and some festivals. They also did not forget their holy shema prayers. They earned their livelihood by producing oil. Their neighbours, therefore, called them Shanwar

telis or "Sabbath-keeping Oilmen". Since oil pressing was a lower caste occupation, the higher castes considered contact with the Bene Israels defiling. Bene Israels did not come into contact with other Jewish groups till as late as the 18th century. It was only later that Ezekiel David Rahabi, (1694-1771) working in the Dutch East India Company became interested in the Bene Israels and taught them Hebrew and prayers. By mid-eighteenth century the Bene Israel began migrating to Bombay, attracted by the employment opportunities offered by the big city. Their first synagogue in Bombay was built in 1796. By 1833 about 2,000 of the Bene Israels lived in Bombay which was one-third of their total population.

They were divided into Gora (White) and Kala (Black) subcastes. The Gora were believed to be the pure descendants of the original seven couples, while the Kala were supposed to be the off springs of the union between Bene Israel men and the native women. The Gora were considered to be superior by the Kala and they both remained aloof from each other. They did not intermarry or eat together.

Later another group of Baghdad Jews discriminated against the Gora Bene Israels in the same way as they discriminated against the Kala. This caste-like practice of remaining exclusive from each other underwent a change with India's independence in 1947 when caste system was officially abolished. However, intermarriage between the Gora and Kala and between them and the Baghdad Jews was rare (Patai, Raphael 1987: 164-172).

The Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews represent religions which have their main sources of origin outside India. Among these the Muslims and the Christians have had the support of political rulers during the reign of the Muslim kings and the British rule respectively. These two religions swelled their number due to conversion of large number of people in India, particularly the lower caste of Hindus and the tribals. The Parsis and the Jews have remained closed to membership from outside due to their very exclusive nature.

### 17.3.1 Geographical Spread

Yet another important feature of religious pluralism can be seen in the geographical spread of religions in India. The Hindus, who constitute the majority religion, are spread all over, but have large concentration in the central and southern states of India with high density pocket in a few northern states and far eastern Assam.

The Muslims, the second largest religious group have relatively greater concentration in South-western states such as Kerala, Karnataka, the northern and eastern states in U.P., Bihar, Assam and pockets of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. They are also spread throughout the country like the Hindus. We have given you in the illustration the maps of India and Pakistan (1931 census) showing the spread of Hindus and Muslims.

The Christians have density concentration in the southern states of Kerala, parts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and the north-eastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya. They are also spread across Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and some parts of other northern states in small pockets. One important feature of geographical settlement of Christians is that they may be found in larger numbers in states with higher tribal population due to the impact of conversion.

Sikhs, yet another important religious group has its territorial localisation in the northern state of Punjab, with pockets of settlement in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Being a mobile and highly entrepreneurial community, Sikhs can be found spread over most parts of India. (We have given you in the illustration the map of India and Pakistan 1931 census) showing the geographical distribution of the Christians and the Sikhs.

Geographically, Buddhism in India, though once highly influential in the entire north, seems to be now localised to Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and in Darjeeling in West Bengal. They are also found in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh where some scheduled caste Hindus have converted to Buddhism. The Jains, are primarily settled in urban areas of the northern states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Being an urban and trading religious group they may be found in all parts of the country.

An important feature of the geographical spread of religions in India is that despite evidence of localisation of a particular religion in some parts of the country, each religious group is spread out throughout the country. This has necessitated a large measure of inter-religious interaction, borrowings of ways and styles of life, sharing common languages and cultural practices across religious affiliations. This has led to a diversification of cultural sub-groups belonging to each religion. The Andhra Muslims and Kashmir Muslims in several respects are different cultural communities. There are very few exceptions to this attribute. These pertain to only minority religions such as the Parsis, Jews and few others, which are highly restricted in their distribution.

#### Activity 1

Select a small area of inhabitants in your city, town or village where you live. Find out from the people in this area such facts as:

- i) which religion they belong to;
- ii) whether they originally belonged to this place or have come from some other place; and
- iii) If they have come from some other place, then how many years back they came..

Write a note of about two pages and compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your study centre.

### 17.3.2 Religion and Sect

An important element of pluralism among religions in India is their sub-division into sects. Max Weber has given a technical measuring to a sect and distinguishes it from church, especially in the context of Christianity. He says that membership of Church (the main religion) is compulsory. It is governed by collective norms or rules and is run by religious functionaries. But the membership to a sect is voluntary. It is individualistic and lends freedom to the followers of the sects from the compulsory obedience to the functionaries of the Church.

Weber has used the term sect in a relatively definitive sense which may not apply to all religions. Sects are however, common to all religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism. Sub-divisions and Sects in a more general sense refer to internal diversities of interpretation of sacred principles, ritual practices and religious practices in a religion. Sects may also evoke historical cleavages within a religion either due to new interpretation of the religious canons or due to factionalisation of the religious leadership. Sects, however, operate within the boundary of the specific religion to which they belong. Yet, the process of differentiation makes it possible that inter-religious proximities of customs, rituals and practices of religion and proximity or religious beliefs across religions is made possible due to this process.

As an example, we may notice that Sufism in Islam, established deeper relationships

with Sikhism, Bhakti movement in Hinduism and with Christian forms of mysticism. Similarly, Lingayat sect in Hinduism established closer relationship with Christian beliefs. Thus, inter-religious borrowings and influences could be observed in most religions across the sects.

There are few religions in India which are not differentiated on the basis of sects. Hinduism always included a diverse range of belief systems from Vedic Hinduism of the past, through **Purans** and **Dharma-Shastras**. Hinduism absorbed numerous religious beliefs and ritual practices. It evolved through this process into many sects and traditions of beliefs and sacred rites. The main sects in Hinduism are, based however, on the **Vaishnavism** (worship of Vishnu) and **Shaivism** (worship of Siva). There are many variations in each of the above two sects. The former promotes strict vegetarianism and puritanism in social and cultural practices. Commitment to Ahimsa or non-violence of this sect is very similar to beliefs of non-violence in Buddhism and Jainism. Shaivism is, however, less puritanical in respect of these values. It permits meat-eating and even drinking; specially among those who are followers of the **tantric** branches of Shaivism.

Many religious movement emerged in India over a period of time based on the beliefs and practices of these sects. The **Bhakti-movement** particularly drew most from Vaishnavism. Similarly, the Lingayat movement in Karnataka drew its inspiration from Shaivism. These sects in Hinduism promoted diversity and innovativeness among the Hindus, and also led to the establishment of many linkages with other religions. Hinduism being a religion without Church, (established unified religious organisation and systems of belief and rituals) its social and cultural character has been more prominent through history in comparison to its ritualistic norms and practices. It has not without reason been described "as a way of life". M.N. Srinivas and A.M. Shah write: "Hinduism lacking a centralised church is so inextricably entangled with Hindu society that it is very difficult to say where one ends and the other begins" (Srinivas and Shah: 1968: 358). Religious pluralism is therefore intrinsic to Hinduism through multiplicity of sects are also through its normative character.

Islam and Christianity too are differentiated into many sects. In Islam the division on the basis of Shia and Sunni denominations is a well recognised one. Religious denomination is a sect which becomes generally accepted by the people and loses much of its vigour. (For further details refer back to unit 12 of Block 3 of this course on Society and Religion). There are several other sects which not only introduce divisions on the basis of differences of interpretation of the sacred traditions but also differences on account of social and cultural interpretations of ritual practices and precepts. Sufism is a very prominent example of this in Islam which allows for a broad banding of more innovative and individualistic viewpoints of Islam which otherwise has a strong communitarian character. Even among Sufis one would find many sub-divisions. Sects and sub-sects are a common feature in most religions because interpretive boundaries of belief and ritual systems in most religions have been always flexible and subject to historical forces.

In Christianity the major sects belong to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The latter emerged through reformation movement in Christianity led by Luther and Calvin. Max Weber has written extensively on this problem. These two branches of Christianity are divided in India into several sects. Roman-Catholic religion has the sects of the Romo-Syrians, Jacobites and Reformed, among others. The Protestants are divided into the sects of Anglican Combination, Baptists, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodists, Congregationalist and Salvationist.

Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism which are sometimes described as differentiation from

the Hindu religion itself, are each internally divided into sects. The Buddhists have **Hinayan** and **Mahayan** sect-divisions; the Jains have **Shwetambara**, and **Digambara** sub-divisions (You will learn more about these religions, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism in the next block, **Religious Pluralism-II**). Sikhs too are divided into different sectarian groups based on normative re-interpretation of the principles of Sikhism and its ritual forms.

The differentiation of religions into sects has a deeper impact on the pluralistic nature of religion. It marks a departure from the rigidity and orthodoxy of specific religions and endows them with the capacity to innovate and respond to social and historical changes in society. Sects, therefore, perform along with intensification of religiosity a function of pluralistic interaction with other religions in specific terms, and with society in general. Max Weber rightly highlighted the developmental contributions that sects make towards the resilience of religion in social life. In India the sects in different religions clearly exemplify the contributions they have made first in the sharpening of the definition of the religious boundaries and secondly, in establishing linkages with other religions, their ideas, belief systems and practices.

**Check Your Proress 1**

i) What do you understand by religious pluralism? Discuss in about 8 lines.

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ii) Distinguish between religion and sect giving an example. Use about 10 lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks:

a) The Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews represent religions which have their main soruce of origin ..... India.

b) An important feature of geographical settlement of Christians in India is



that they may be found in large numbers in states with higher .....  
population due to the impact of .....

- c) The process of differentiation within the main religion makes it possible for different religions to share their customs, rituals and religious practices, as well as, their beliefs and values ..... in Islam is a good example of such a religious inter-mixture.

### 17.3.3 Caste and Religion

You cannot fully understand the nature of religion in India without analysing the pervasive role of the caste institution among various religious groups. Caste is based on the Hindu religious view of birth-rebirth and Karma (see Box 17.03 for further details). In Hinduism caste groups are placed into a hierarchical order of pure and impure ritual status within the four Varna wherein the Brahman are at the top, followed by the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra and the out-caste. In actual life, caste exists in society as *Jatis*. There are thousands of Jatis among the Hindus each contributing to vertical differentiation and horizontal solidarity among the castes. Therefore, Hindu religion does not constitute a community in a solidary sense. It remained a tolerant adaptive and liberal religion in India. It recognises and is tolerant of differences.

#### Box 17.03

**Karma Theory**—The doctrine of karma, and related to this doctrine, the cycle of birth and rebirth or Samsara is one of the essential tenets of Hinduism. It has deep influence on Hindu thought and way of life. It is based on the idea of transmigration of souls. It is believed that every action or deed has a consequence which is not merely of a physical nature, but it also has a mental and moral character. A persons birth in this life is determined by his or her deeds in the past life. The only escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth is through achieving the state of nirvana or true knowledge.

The other major religions in India such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism are based essentially on communication principle, at least in ideal terms. By communitarian we mean that these religions give importance to the community of its followers. None of these religions recognise inequalities or hierarchy based on caste discrimination. However, in real life none of these religions are free from the existence of caste of caste-like groups which are hierarchically arranged in terms of social status and prestige. These groups are also endogamous and observe social restrictions in marital and social relationships outside their caste-group. The Muslims have caste-like divisions in India in all parts of the country. The main castes among them as listed in the census of 1931 for the northern state of United Provinces are: Shaikh, Pathan, Saiyid, Rajpur (Muslim) and Mughal among the upper category, and Julaha, Manihar, Dhunia, Teli, Faquir, Nai (Hajjam), Darzi, Dhobi, Qassab among the lower caste hierarchy. The upper Muslim castes belonged to ruling or landlord families or they were in the profession of learning. The lower castes had occupations families or they were in the profession of learning. The lower castes had occupations carrying lesser social prestige in the society. Each of these castes was endogamous and also observed social and cultural distance from each other based on hierarchy. Contemporary studies have re-confirmed these observations. There has been some social mobility among the Muslim castes based on changes in occupation, but the caste-like social inequality even today continues to exist.

Christianity in India has not been able to get itself free from the caste system. Even after conversion most caste disabilities of the former (pre-conversion) time continue

to persist. Depending upon the caste from which members converted they continue to have the social status in the Christian community commensurate with their earlier caste status. Similar caste recognitions exist for Muslim converts also. As Christianity has expanded through conversion in India it has incorporated more and more caste-like groups obeying the rules of hierarchy and endogamy within each caste. The exception in this regard are possibly the tribal communities from the north-east which never had the caste institution in their social organisation. Caste prejudices are reported to be all pervasive among most Indian Christian communities. Similar caste distinctions can be found among the Sikhs also. The conversion to Buddhism, a religion which rejects caste system and social discrimination as its basis, has not been able to eradicate the existence of caste disabilities of the members. As in Islam and Christianity, in Sikhism too, the caste system prevails.

We have discussed in some detail the presence of caste in most religions in India, even among those which tend to reject its validity in their religious percepts, to illustrate that such social divisions within each religion reinforces the processes of religious pluralism. Caste being based on the principle of social segmentation, strengthens the forces of differentiation within a religious group. And since most castes are linked with hereditary occupations, they tend to share commonalities of custom, folkways, and beliefs with members of the same occupational caste in other religions. This led to inter-religious interactions, institutional, social and cultural linkages. Many occupational rituals and customs are shared by members of the caste groups commonly found in various religions despite the religious differences. This is particularly so in respect of the caste with agricultural occupation, and artisans. In terms of inter-religious contacts or commonalities of values and beliefs caste differentiation in each religions in India demonstrates pluralism and has in large measure also contributed to tolerance and brotherliness across the religious divide.

### 17.3.4 Language and Religious Pluralism

India is a land of diverse cultural patterns which have existed within the framework of religious, linguistic, geographical and local traditions. The census of 1931 revealed thirteen languages of outstanding numerical significance each having more than 9 million speakers. About 90% of the population was covered by these major languages. Today the number of numerically significant languages as recognised by the Constitution has increased. Language gives people new identities. There are several hundred languages and thousands of dialects belonging to various linguistic families. India thus presents a formidable mosaic of linguistic distribution each with individual cultural overtones. Religious differentiation exists within the setting of this linguistic divisions. As a result of this most major religions in India; Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have their members coming from different linguistic communities. Just



Children with Santa Claus.

as caste divides and also unites in some respects, the members coming from different religions belonging to the linguistic communities in India perform the same function. This is because people for a linguistic community share many common values, cultural style and way of life. Language not only gives identity to people but also serves as the potent vehicle of cultural expression.

Linguistic variations within the followers of the same religions made it possible for most people in India to take a broader and more liberal view of the relationship between religion and social and cultural life. There was continual sharing of folkways, styles of life, dietary preferences etc. across religions. This reinforced religious tolerance leading to peaceful co-existence.

### Check Your Progress 2

i) In what ways are religion and caste interlinked. Explain in about 10 lines.

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ii) What role does language play in religious pluralism? Discuss in about 8 lines.

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iii) Tick the correct answer. True (T) False (F)

- a) Caste is not exactly based on the Hindu religious view of birth-rebirth and Karma.
- b) Hinduism is a pluralistic religion in essence.
- c) Christianity has expanded through conversion in India and has therefore, incorporated more and more caste-life groups, with some exceptions in the tribal communities of the north-east.
- d) Language not only gives identity to people but it also determines their religious faith.

## 17.4 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS VALUE

You have learnt so far some of the factual indicators of religious pluralism in India such as its location in the demographic distribution of major religions in India, its geographical dispersal. You have also learnt about some of the social and ideological factors which brings about differentiation within a religion on the basis of sects, the role of caste in religion and the place that linguistic diversity has in reinforcing religious pluralism.

Now we are going to learn about religious pluralism in our country from the perspective of values. The question is: how far do the different religions in India share elements of commonality in terms of values? What is the place of tolerance of other faiths in the value systems that are enshrined in the canons of the diverse religions? To what extent does religion encompass the entirety of the social and cultural matrix within which members of a particular religion operate in society?

We may be able to respond to these questions taking into view the nature of individual religions. Among the Indian religions Islam, Christianity, Sikhism have a strong communitarian emphasis. Islam and Christianity also has organised church to consolidate and monitor the life styles of their followers. Islamic concept of **Umma** (religious community) and the Christian concept of brotherhood (community of followers) are meant to reinforce religious solidarity among the believers.

### 17.4.1 Religion and Social Identity

Over a period of time due to changes in social and political contexts in which religion has functioned in society, the sense of identity and exclusiveness has increased in most religions. One consequence of this process of change has been the emphasis on purification through which effort is made to shed customs, rituals and beliefs from religious practices of the group which do not harmonise with the essential attributes of a religion. Emphasis on the exclusive nature and identity of religions has been in evidence in India in several religions. Islam which expanded due to conversion of people of diverse faiths used to be more syncretic i.e. a synthesis of many ideas from different religions and non-exclusive in respect of beliefs and rituals in most parts of the country.

Even today many Muslim communities maintain some values, beliefs and practices which are survivals from their pre-Islamic cultural past. The same is true about the Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists. Even amongst the Jews in India we find influence of another religion. For example, amongst the Bene Israel Jews there has been a strong impact of Hinduism on their own religious values and beliefs, some even contradictory to their beliefs. One of the most distinct features of the religious life of the Bene Israel is their perspective of Hindu religion. It is said that the Jewish community in India re the only Jews in modern times who live in a polytheistic environment where people believe in number of gods and goddesses. Polytheism was the most disliked sentiment of the Jews ever since the Biblical times and they viewed this practice as a vice and sin.

However, amongst the Bene Israel, no such ancient abhorrence for an antiheathen attitude can be seen. The Hindu environment, over the long period of contact resulted in the Bene Israel having a very positive and appreciative attitude towards Hinduism.

One of the reasons for such an attitude was the absence of hostility, persecution and oppression of their religion. They were given a niche in the Hindu society to live in peace, just as other communities lived. They were given freedom to follow their own ways of life. In such an environment, which was historically a unique experience

for the Jews who have been persecuted everywhere else, the Hindu religion on which such a social relationship could survive, appeared to them as having redeeming features not in conflict with their own religious beliefs.

They could ignore the polytheistic character of Hinduism and in fact, they, till recently, believed that eating of beef was prohibited in the Bible. They also considered remarriage of widows impermissible. Both these views are the result of the impact of Hindu values on their own (Patai, Raphael 1987: 164-172). You have already learnt how caste institution which has its origin in Hinduism subsists in most other religious communities in India.

#### 17.4.2 Religious Pluralism and Shared Values

The persistence of the values of religious pluralism in India can be observed at many levels. First, in the fact that most religions share in common a set of values which can be characterised as universal. Tolerance of all faiths, love for fellow beings, non-violence and righteous conduct are common to all faiths. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Sikhism share the values of non-violence and humanism in common. Islam places great emphasis on just and human values. Religions, therefore, share certain universal values in common irrespective of their internal differences. This enriches pluralism.

Secondly, due to historical reasons most religions in India which have expanded through conversion of the local population such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. retain in their values and beliefs many elements which come from their past and thus belong to other religions. There are many tribal religions and ritual practices which persist in Hinduism. It is believed that some of its deities, such as Siva, Hanuman (Monkey god) and Krishna are incorporation into Hinduism of deities of tribal origin.

Myths and legends abound about tribal deities being installed as paramount Hindu god-heads. For instance lord **Jagannath** of Puri temple is said to have a tribal origin. Many other attributes of the religion of the tribes, such as the belief in spirits (**animism, totemism** i.e., identifying an animal or part of the animal to which a tribe attributes its origin or which is treated as a saviour in crisis and symbolically represented at rituals) can be traced in many non-tribal religions, such as, in Hinduism, Buddhism and many sects of Christianity. You will learn more about religions of the tribes in the next unit. Jainism too has in its rituals and beliefs elements which can be traced to the other religions. Sikhism has drawn heavily from Hinduism, Islam and Sufism. The exclusive and syncretic or non-exclusive levels of value orientations in religion are a feature to be found in all major religions of India.

#### Activity 2

Do you know of any inter-religions marriage taking place in real life, film or fiction? What was the socio-cultural impact of such a marriage?

Write down your views and observations in a note of about two pages. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your study centre.

Thirdly, religion in its day-to-day expression maintains closer relationships with existential (life-related) problems of human beings. Births, deaths, diseases, survival and physical sustenance are existential issues which no religion can treat as marginal. In a way, religion is a form of response to existential dilemmas of human kind. For this reason each religion contains in its repertoire, along with the abstract principles of dogmas, a set of norms which are designed to deal with material life. Space, time, nature etc. are defined by each religion from the perspective of the sacred.

This element in religion perforce introduces ethical principles and values in each religion which deal with existential issues such as work, occupation, space, time nature etc., since the material conditions under which religion responds to these elements of human existence have a common character. For this reason despite exclusiveness of each religion from the other ones, each religion shares normative features with other religions in common. For instance, different occupational groups despite differences of religion, cherish beliefs and values having sacred or religious character (taboos, calendric preferences, belief in sacred space or occupational rituals) in common on account of their work-situation. Peasant groups exemplify this in large measure.

### 17.4.3 Religious Beliefs and Rituals

Finally, religious comprised both systems of belief and rituals. The systems of belief and rituals which characterises all religions comprises of myths and ceremonies, rites and customs. Ritual has been described in anthropology as any formal actions following a set pattern which express through symbol a public or shared meaning. They are typically the practical aspects of a religious system and they express sacred values. All religions have sacred festivals, celebrations and get-togethers related to various myths, legends or normative perscriptions of the religion. Many of these festivals are occasion for members of all religious groups to participate.



Deepawali lamp lights.

Among the Hindus, the **Ram Lila** is an occasion when people of different religions participate in the celebration. Similarly, **Mohurram** among the Muslims offers an occasion for members of other religious groups to participate. This enhances the strength and quality of religious pluralism at the level of values and beliefs. It encourages inter-religious participation and mutuality among the people. Rituals are therefore, a very concrete manifestation of the pluralistic values in religion.

The next unit on religions of the tribes will explain to you yet another aspect of religious pluralism in India.

#### Check Your Progress 3

- i) Name the religions which are strongly communitarian in about two lines.

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- ii) Describe one of the consequences of increase in the sense of identity and exclusiveness which has occurred in most religions. Use about eight lines.

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iii) Mention at least two of the universal values shared by most of the religions in a plural society like India. Use about two lines.

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iv) What has been the relationship between religions of the tribes and non-tribal religions? Explain in about eight lines.

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v) Discuss one of the reasons due to which, inspite of the exclusive nature of each religion in a plural society, they share common normative features. Use about eight lines.

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## 17.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have learnt about the meaning and nature of religious pluralism. You have studied how religious pluralism is a fact in Indian life. The demography of religious group and its territorial localisation supports this viewpoint. There are additional elements in most religions. For example, the existence of sects, castes or caste-like divisions which reinforce pluralism in religion, both as fact and as value. Finally, you have studied how values of pluralism have not only existed in all religions in India but have persisted through a long period of time.

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## 17.6 KEY WORDS

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- Canons** : Laws or rules related with the body of the religious organisation.
- Communitarian** : Inclined towards giving more significance to living in a community, sharing collective religious practices, performing rituals and so on.
- Denomination** : When a sect gets generally accepted by the people and relaxes its religious vigour, it is called a denomination.
- Functionaries** : Those who hold an office. In our case, those people who hold religious office, such as, a priest or clergyman.
- Normative** : That which is related to the moral structure of the society; the rules and regulations of social behaviour guided by the norms and values in a society.
- Pluralism** : It refers to the philosophy which recognises more than one principle of being. In our context, pluralism in the sense of religion means a society in which people of different religious faiths live, preserving their own distinct customs.
- Repertoire** : A collection of, or a storehouse of items. In our case, values, beliefs and rituals present in a religion.
- Sect** : It is a religious group which stands for those who dissent from an established church and are united as a communion of religious brotherhood with a well-defined creed. Membership to this group is voluntary rather than compulsory.
- Syncretic** : That which is a synthesis of or has a blending of ideas, values, customs and religious practices from different religions and in this sense non-exclusive.

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## 17.7 FURTHER READING

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Davis, Kingsley, 1951. *Population of India and Pakistan*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey.

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

Barth A., 1990. *Religion of India*. Low Price Publication: Delhi.

Srinivas, M.N. & Shah A.M., 1968. "Hinduism" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, VI. 5, pp. The Macmillan Company & The Free Press: New York.

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## 17.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Religious pluralism means a society in which people of various religions come



together during a long period of time, bringing their own customs, faiths and cultures. Due to the close interaction amongst them some common values emerge. They begin to share many of their customs, values and beliefs due to this long period of association.

- ii) Religion is the main body from which the different branches emerge as protest groups known as sects. Sects and sub-sects are formed due to the internal differentiation that occurs in the main body of a religion. For example, in Christianity the membership to the church (the main religion) is compulsory. It is governed by collective norms and run by the religious functionaries. But a sect is voluntary, individualistic and it gives freedom to the followers of the sect from the compulsory obedience to the functionaries of the church.
- iii) a) Outside,  
b) Tribal, conversions,  
c) Sufism.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- i) Caste system is based on the Hindu religious view of birth-rebirth and Karma theory. In Hinduism castes are placed in a hierarchical order based on the concept of pure and impure. According to this hierarchy the Brahmin are at the top, next are the Kshatriya, then Vaisya and finally the Sudra. This hierarchy also indicated occupational hierarchy as well, in Hinduism. Due to the long association of other religions, such as Islam and Christianity with Hinduism, many of the customs of the Hindus came to be adopted by them. Especially, the converts to these religions from the Hindu fold carried over their caste distinctions and customs to their new religions.
- ii) Most of the major religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and, even Sikhism, to a certain extent have their members distributed throughout India in different linguistic communities. Language is something which binds a people together through common customs, living conditions and so on. It is a vehicle of cultural expression which leads to integration of people of different religions. In this sense it plays an important role in maintaining the pluralistic character of Indian society and religion.
- iii) a) F  
b) T  
c) T  
d) F

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- i) Strongly communitarian religions are, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity.
- ii) One of the consequences of an increase in the sense of identity and exclusiveness in most religions is that these religions have begun to place more emphasis on purification of their customs, rituals and beliefs. They have tried to give up those customs, ritual practices and beliefs which did not go with the essential qualities of their own religion.
- iii) Belief in humanism and non-violence are two universal values shared by most

religions in a plural society.

- iv) Due to the close interaction between people of tribal origins and non-tribal religions living in an area, many of the customs, values and religious practices get imbibed by people of the tribal from non-tribal religions and vice-versa. For example, Hinduism has adopted many of their deities from religions of the tribes. Some of these deities are like Siva, Hanuman and Krishna.
- v) In many of the regions in India, people of different religions share similar normative features since they belong to the same occupational group. The existential conditions of living together in the same economic and political environment necessitates a somewhat similar normative structure for these occupational groups which crosses the boundaries of religious exclusiveness.