
UNIT 19 HINDUISM

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Hinduism: The Theological and Metaphysical Basis
 - 19.2.1 Brahman and Atman
 - 19.2.2 Dharma
 - 19.2.3 Karma
 - 19.2.4 Moksha
- 19.3 Basic Cults and Deities in Hinduism
- 19.4 Hindu Social Institutions
 - 19.4.1 Caste
 - 19.4.2 Marriage
 - 19.4.3 Family
 - 19.4.4 Inheritance
 - 19.4.5 Hindu Social Institutions
- 19.5 Hinduism in the Historical Settings
 - 19.5.1 Bhakti
 - 19.5.2 Encounter with Islam
 - 19.5.3 Encounter with the West
- 19.6 Hinduism in the Contemporary Period
 - 19.6.1 Internationalisation of Hinduism
 - 19.6.2 Individualised Cults
 - 19.6.3 Politicisation of Hinduism
- 19.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.8 Key Words
- 19.9 Further Readings
- 19.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

19.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall deal with Hinduism in the context of religious pluralism in India. After reading this unit you should be able to

- explain the theological and metaphysical basis of Hinduism
- describe the basic cults and deities of Hinduism
- discuss the Hindu social institutions
- analyse Hinduism in its historical settings
- examine the emerging facets of Hinduism in the contemporary period.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit begins with a discussion on the theological and the metaphysical basis of Hinduism. It is recognised that it is very difficult to define Hinduism. However, there are a set of central belief systems of Hinduism. The belief systems are centred around the notion of *Brahman*, *Atman*, *Karma*, *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Moksha* and the ideas of purity and pollution. At the outset we discuss these belief systems. There are numerous cults and deities in Hinduism. We discuss some of the basic cults and deities in Hinduism to this unit. The Hindu way of life is reflected through the social institutions of this religion. We also discuss here the social institutions of marriage, family and inheritance in Hinduism at length. Hinduism is the oldest of all great religions of the world. In its historical setting there have been various movements in Hinduism and it has also encountered various exogenous (external) and endogenous (internal) forces.

In this unit we discuss the Bhakti movement in Hinduism and the encounter of Hinduism with Islam and the West. In the last section of this unit we discuss the contemporary facets of Hinduism. Here we cover the aspects related to the efforts made towards internationalisation of Hinduism, emergence of individualised cults in Hinduism and politicisation of Hinduism.

19.2 HINDUISM: THE THEOLOGICAL AND METAPHYSICAL BASIS

Hinduism is followed by a vast majority of Indian population (more than 80%). However, Hinduism is not confined to India only. The followers of Hinduism, the Hindus, spread over to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Indonesia, East and South Africa, the Caribbean Islands, Guyana, Fiji, U.K., U.S.A. and Canada and in many other countries of the globe to a lesser extent.

Hinduism is an embodiment of a vast body of literature. M.N. Srinivas and A.M. Shah (1972) point out that the doctrines of Hinduism are not embodied in one sacred book, nor does Hinduism have a single historical founder. There is a vast body of sacred literature in Hinduism. These are the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanisads, Vedangas, Dharmasastras, Niboudhas, Puranas, Itihasas, Darsanas, Aganas, Mahabharata, etc. There are, not one, but innumerable gods, and it is not essential to believe in the essence of god in order to be a Hindu (358). This facet of Hinduism keeps it tolerant and open to dissent from within or without. Hence there are diverse interactions between the theological or metaphysical and the local levels of Hinduism in practice.

We should recognise that it is very difficult to define Hinduism. Hinduism unites a diverse elements of beliefs and practices into a continuous whole. It covers the whole of life. It has religious, social, economic, literary and artistic aspects. Hinduism, thus, resists a precise definition, but a common code of characteristics that most Hindus share can be identified (The New Encyclopaedia of Britannica, 1985: 935).

Hinduism is the oldest of all great religions of the world. In the process of social evolution and change various sects have developed in Hinduism. Each of the sects has distinctive sets of literatures, Gods and Goddesses. However, fundamental to all Hindu sects is a set of eternal belief systems centered around the Hindu concepts of *Brahman* (universal soul) and *Atman* (individual soul), *Dharma*, *Karma*, *Artha*, *Moksha* and the ideas of purity and pollution. Let us discuss these concepts putting them in a broad societal context of Hinduism.

19.2.1 Brahman and Atman

Hindus believe in an eternal, infinite and all-embracing ultimate force called *Brahman*. The *Brahman* is present in all forms of life. The relationship between the *Brahman* (the universal soul) and *Atman* (the individual soul) has been the main concern in Hinduism. However, there are diverse views on this relationship. One view is that there is no existence of God and the *Brahman* is absolute and attributeless. However, most other views recognise the existence of God; and consider the issue of his relations with *Brahman* on the one hand, and the *Atman* on the other. "The *Atman*, considered to be indestructible and passes through an endless migration, or series of incarnations—human, animal or super human, is influenced by the net balance of good and bad *karma* (deeds) in previous births. The goodness or badness is defined by reference to *Dharma* (Srinivas and Shah 1972: 359). Hence let us know the meanings of *Dharma* and *Karma*.

Dharma has plural meanings. It “includes cosmological, ethical, social and legal principles that provide the basis for the notion of an ordered universe. In the social context, it stands for the imperative or righteousness in the definition of good life. More specifically, *dharma* refers to the rules of social intercourse laid down traditionally for every category of actor (or moral agent) in terms of social status (*Varna*), the stage of life (*ashrama*) and the qualities of inborn nature (*guna*). (We shall discuss the relationships between these three in the following sub-sections). Put simply, for every person there is a mode of conduct that is most appropriate: it is his or her *svadharma*, which may be translated as ‘vocation’. Indeed the foundation of good life is laid down by *Dharma*. Thus *Dharma* consists of the “rational pursuit of economic and political goals (*Artha*) as well as pleasure (*Karma*)”. The goals of life (*purushartha*) also incorporate the goals of *moksha* or “freedom through transcendence from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. *Dharma*, inclusive of *artha* and *kama*, is a grand design of life, and *moksha* is the alternative (Madan, 1989: 118-119).



Hindu saints often put their teachings into compositions which they sang as part of their devotional activities.

To be more clear let us have a brief discussion on notions of *Purusartha* (goals of a man). *Rins* (obligations) and *Varnaashram* (divisions of the society) and the interdependence among them.

a) **Purusartha**

There has been a constant quest towards achieving a fruitful life in Hinduism. Pursuits of certain goals has been considered inhabitable, for the achievement of such life. The integrated life of a Hindu involves the pursuit of four goals: Dharma, Artha, (material pursuits) *Kama* (love desire) and *Moksha* (salvation). The pursuit of these four fold goals is known as *purusartha*. These goals are to be pursued in a righteous way in this *samsara* (the arena where the cycle of birth and rebirth continues to operate until one attains salvation). Hinduism is a holistic way of living and thinking. The full validity of Hindu life lies in the integration of the above four goals. This process puts every moment of life of a Hindu under self-examination and binds him with enormous social and spiritual obligations. Thus Hinduism calls for the voluntary acceptance and submission to the four defined obligations (*Rins*).

b) **Rins**

There are four important obligations (*Rins*) for a Hindu. These are obligations to the sages, to the ancestors, to god and to human beings. These obligations are fulfilled through the performance of duties in various stages of life (*ashrama*).

There are four stages of life of a Hindu. These are: *Brahmacharya*, *Grihasta*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. In the first stage of life a young Hindu should devote to study. He leads a celibate life, and involves himself in the pursuit of knowledge. The second stage of life is that of a householder beginning with marriage. The third stage begins when the householder accepts the life of a wanderer maintaining some linkages with the household. In the last stage of life the old Hindu breaks away all ties with the household and goes to the forest and accept the life of a sage.

Vidya Nivas Misra in his book *Hindudharm: Jivan me Santan ke Khoj* (Hindi) points out that by studying scriptures, accumulating knoweldge, and following a rigorous way of life a Hindu may fulfil his obligation to the sages. These are the activities of the *Brahmacharya ashram*. The obligation to the ancestors can be fulfilled by leading the life of a householder — the *Grihasth ashram*. As a householder his responsibilities are to procreate, to maintain the tradition of his ancestor, to take care of the young who are at the stage of learning, to take care of those who are at the foresters and wanderers stages of life. In the third stage of life i.e. *vanaprastha* openings are made to be one with the gods. Leaving home behind the lives the life of homelessness. "So be one with gods means to be one with all manifest powers reflected in all elements, all living beings and all nature". This stage of life prepares him for such a manifestation. In the fourth and the final stage he fulfills his obligations to all beings. He becomes nameless, homeless wanderer and becomes a renouncer.

c) **Varna ashrama**

The goals of Hindu life are achieved within the context of Hindu social organisation. There is a four-fold division of Hindu society in terms of four *varnas*: the brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and sudra. A Hindu is born into a *varna* and follows his *varnadharma* in this birth for *moksha* — the ultimate goal of the life. According to Rig Veda the four varna orders emerged from the limbs of the primeval man who is a victim of the divine sacrifice that produced the cosmos. The Brahmana emerged from his mouth and are supposed to be involved in the pursuits of knowledge. The Kshatriya emerged from his arm to be the warriors and rulers; the Vaishya emerged from his thigh to be in the pursuit of trade and commerce and lastly the Sudras emerged from his feet to be in the pursuit of service of other three varnas.

It is significant that untouchables are not mentioned in the Vedic hymn (Srinivas and Shah, 1972: 358). There are innumerable number of castes within the broad fold of these varnas with ascribed occupation, social status and localised concepts of purity and pollution. Traditionally, each caste (*jati*) performs its *jatidharma* to achieve the goals of life.

All Hindus recognise this system and can place their identity in terms of the *varna ashram*. Most of the basic ideas on *varna* system and its links to the concepts of *Karma* and *Dharma* are universally present in the world view of Hindus.

19.2.3 Karma

“The notions of *Dharma* and *Karma* are closely interlinked to each other and on many occasion they are indistinguishable and inseparable.” If *Dharma* is a social consciousness about the good life, *Karma* is the individual actor’s effort to live according to it”. The literary meaning of the notion of *Karma* is action. According to the message of *Bhagavad Gita* the direction of the *Karma* is value neutral and one must perform *Karma* without expecting the rewards which may be desirable or undesirable. It also accords highest emphasis on the accomplishment of *Karma*. Popularly the notion of *Karma* is also related to the perceptions of birth, rebirth and salvation. It is popularly believed that an individual is born to a higher or lower caste and suffers the pains and enjoys pleasures in the present life in terms of the *Karma* he/she undertook in the past life. Again his or her future life, rebirth or salvation will be determined in terms of the *Karma* he/she undertakes in the present life. In all Indian cultural tradition all human actions have inescapable consequences. The fruits of action brings joy or sorrow depending on whether certain actions have been good or evil. Whatever cannot be enjoyed or suffered in the present life must be experienced hereafter in another birth, which may not be a human birth. To be born a human being is a rare privilege because it is only through such a birth that a soul may be freed from reincarnation” (Madan, 1989: 123). It is significant that there are three pragmatic aspects of the concept of *Karma* as practised in popular Hinduism.



Hindu temple complex. Note the use of conical turrets in the architectural design of the temple.

- i) Orthodox Hindu will explain *Karma* in terms of certain rituals in the form of worship or prayer of favourite Gods and Goddesses which are popularly known as *puja*. Though, the origin of *puja* goes back to *Vedic* period, sacrificial rituals became associated with the concept of *Karma* in the later part of the evolution of Hinduism. It is popularly believed that the direction of life (present or future) can also be determined through the performance of such *Karma*.
- ii) *Karma* has also become identified with life cycle rituals of the Hindus. It is significant that every Hindu is to follow distinctive life cycle rituals (*samskara*) at birth, marriage and death. These rituals are performed for the moral refinement of the individual to make them complete and perfect, and ultimately after death, "transform into an ancestor". Thus the rituals give social identity to the newborn. Through the rituals of marriage the ocean of life is filled with love. "The so called rites of passage are in fact rituals of transformation and continuity in one great chain of being".
- iii) Besides offerings of *puja* (both at home and in the temple) and performing of the life cycle rituals, offerings of prayers at the sacred places (Tirthas) are also important aspects of Hindu way life and the *Karma*. Going on pilgrimages particularly on auspicious occasions are also scripturally recommended *Karma* (you will be able to know more about these aspects in Unit No. 29 of this course).

We may also point out the various sects and cults in India have a very rigorous definition of *Karma* dividing them into various types and linking them to *Samsara* and *moksa*.

It is significant to mention here that a typical Hindu wants liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. To him the *Karmic* store of accumulated merit may appear to be a trap and hereby abandon all worldly *Karma*. However, Bhagavad Gita gives a proper direction towards this dilemma. Gita emphasises on the accomplishment of *Karma* rather than the abandonment of *Karma*. It "teaches the ethics of altruism. If one performs one's duty in a spirit of sacrifice, eliminating one's ego and self interest, one is liberated from the fruits of action even before death. One of the most crucial statements in the Bhagavad Gita bears on this point: "Your entitlement is to *Karma* alone, never to its fruits. The hope of such fruit should not therefore be the motive for action, you should not therefore become inactive". (cf. Madan, 1989: 127).

19.2.4 Moksha

The concept of *Moksha* (liberation from the chain of rebirth) is closely related to the notion of *Karma* and in turn with *Dharma*. It is the reward of the persistent good deeds, *Karma*, that liberalise the individual from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth; and ultimately brings him in contact with the *Brahman* (the universal soul). Hindu theology is largely preoccupied with the issue of achievement of *Moksha*. Sound knowledge, good deeds and love and devotion towards God are the ways through which *Moksha* can be achieved. For acquiring knowledge an individual is required to renounce the world and lead the life of an ascetic. However, this method of achieving *Moksha* was followed only by a few. The most popular form of devotion, however, is the worship of one's chosen God according to tradition. It is significant to mention here that Bhagavad gita has given a new direction for achieving *Moksha*. The Bhagavad Gita has emphasised on the way of works and devotion to bring liberation with the reach of "man-in-the-World", including women and the lower castes. In the last hundred years the Bhagavad Gita reinterpreted by Indian political leaders, including Gandhi and Tilak, to provide the basis for live devoted to altruistic action (Srinivas & Shah 1872: 359).

19.3 BASIC CULTS AND DEITIES IN HINDUISM

It is significant that, although various sects of Hinduism follow their own sets of literature, most of the Hindus recognise the sacredness of Vedas — the oldest text of Hinduism. “Vedism was almost entirely concerned with the cult of fire sacrifice (Yajna) and the continual regeneration of the universe that resulted from it. By means of the correspondences that linked the ritual to both the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, the sacrificer simultaneously contributed to the welfare of the transcendental order and furthered his own interest. These correspondences were explored in the philosophical Vedic texts, the *Upanisads* in which a search for the knowledge that would liberate man from repeated death led to the earliest formulations of Hinduism”. The chief Vedic Gods are *Brahma* the creator, *Vishnu* the protector God of extension and pervasiveness and *Siva* the perserver and destroyer. It is significant that the major deities of Hinduism have many forms based on distinctive mythology. For example, “Vishnu has a number of incarnations, the chief of which are *Rama* (man), *Krishna* (man). The idea behind the many forms is that God periodically allows himself to be reborn on earth, to overcome evil and restore reighteousness.

Box 1

Puja (worship) and *bhakti* (devotion) are important aspects of theistic Hinduism which gradually replaced the Vedic sacrificial cult by devotion and worship to an image of the deity. The main purpose of this *puja* is the communion with deity gradually leading to a more permanent, even a closer relationship between the worshipper and the god. Hence based on worship three important cults emerged in theistic Hinduism: (a) *Vaishnavism*: *the worship of Vishnu). It emphasises a personal relation with a loving and gracious god. (b) *Saivism* (the worship of Siva) is more asceptically inclined. However, it also often incorporates yogic mystical practices into its worship”. (c) *Saktism*: Cult of Goddess is an important component of theistic Hinduism in the form of worship of mother goddesses like Devi, Durga, Kali etc. It follows the tantric methods of tapping the creating energies (Saktis) within oneself. You can find *Saktism* within the broad fold of *Vaishnavism* and *Saivism* whereby Laxmi and Parvati, the divine consorts of Vishnu and Siva respectively are worshipped in many places in India. (*The New Encyclopedia of Britannica* 1985: 935). The mother goddesses like Shakti, Durga, Parvati, Kali, Laxmi, Saraswati are popular deities in Hinduism. Again, Kartikeya and Ganesa the sons of Siva and Durga, *Hanuman* chief of the monkey army of Rama are also popular deities.

Hindu mythology has depicted numerous deities—major and minor. A significant number of these deities are the God of nature viz., *Indra* (the God of Sky), *Agni* (the God of fire), *Varuna* (the God of water). The *Vahana* (vehicles) in the form of birds or animals on which Gods/Goddesses sit, the sun, moon, stars, rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, snakes are also worshipped in Hinduism. Besides, there are important localised deities in Hinduism in various parts of the country viz., goddess Kali and Manasa are popular in Bengal. Some localised deities also become universally accepted in Hinduism over a period of time viz. Mata Santoshi and Goddess Vaishnadevi of northern India, Srivenkatesh of Tirupati, South India.

The trends of localised manifestation of some deities and universalisation of some local deities are of great sociological significance. There are enourmous ties of localised culture in the great tradition of Hinduism. These ties are often reflected in the popularity of localised deities and in the patterns of their universalisation. (For further detail you may see Block 1 of ESO-02).

Check Your Progress 1

i) Tick mark the correct answer.

Hinduism is

- 1) the youngest of all great religions
- 2) the second oldest of all great religions
- 3) emerged in the fourth century B.C.
- 4) the oldest of all great religions.

ii) *Dharma* provides the basis for the notion of an ordered universe based on the principles of

- 1) Cosmologis
- 2) Ethics
- 3) Social and legal
- 4) All of the above.

iii) Which one of the following is not a cult in theistic Hinduism?

- 1) Vaishnavism
- 2) Saivism
- 3) Saktism
- 4) None of the above.

19.4 HINDU SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Hindu social institutions are distinctive in nature both in terms of their form and function. These social institutions ideally operate according to prescribed norms and religious sanction. Let us examine some of these institutions.

19.4.1 Caste

Caste is a hereditary social institution based on the principle of endogamy, hierarchy, occupational specialisation and purity and pollution. Complete commensality prevails only within it. There are various kinds of restrictions imposed on inter caste relationships. These restrictions are explicit in the acceptance of food and drink by the upper castes from a lower ones, their inter caste marriage, sex relation, on going or touching the upper castes by a lower ones etc. The implicit and explicit meanings are that the lower caste people are impure and by their simple touch they will pollute the upper caste members. Hence there are various prescribed rites for the repurification of the upper caste members. Indeed, traditional Hindu life is arranged in terms of the hierarchical orders to the caste system. It is sociologically an ascribed status group. You may like to see Block 5 of ESO-02 to have a better idea on caste system in India.

19.4.2 Marriage

Among the Hindus marriage is an obligatory sacrament. It is in the context that for obtaining salvation a Hindu is required to perform certain rituals towards the gods and the ancestors as prescribed in the religious texts. The rituals are performed by the male descendants. Hence every Hindu must marry to have a male descendent for salvation.

Box 2

There are well defined Samskara (Sacraments) in Hinduism. In Hinduism each and every Samskara has a particular object i.e. to cleanse to be fit to be used in a divine activity. All aspects of Hindu life are a part of the divine activity. Thus through the processes of various *samskara* all aspects of Hindu life are purified to be the part of the divine. The Brahma Sutra (1.1.4) says: Samskara is a happening made possible through investment or accentuation of qualities in a person or an object and through cleansing of the stain attached to the person or the object." Utterances of Mantras is an essential part of the *samskara*. It is believed that such utterances invests a person or an object with same divine power and purifies them. To Vidya Nivas Misra 193 samskaras are investiture-cum-purificatory rites. These are performed in different stages of the Hindus from prenatal to funeral. These are enumerated to be sixteen:

Conception (Garbhadharna = placing the seed in the womb), Invocation to the male child (Pumsavana), Braiding of the hair of the pregnant women (Simantonanayana), Offering to Vishnu, the sustainer (Vishnu Bali in the eighth month of pregnancy), Birth rites (Jata Karma), Giving a name (Nama-Karana), Taking a child out of the house (Niskramana), first feeding (Anna-prasana), Tonsure (Caula-Karma), the rite of letters (Aksararambha), Piercing of the ear lobe (Karnacedha), Sacred thread ceremony (Upanayana = Lit. taking a boy to the place of Guru for study), initiation into the Vedic studies (vedarambha), Entering into life (Samavartana), Marriage (Vivaha), Last rite (Antyesti).

According to the ancient Hindu texts there are three main objectives of marriage. These are *dharma* (honest and upright conduct), *praja* (progeny) and *rati* (sensual pleasure). Thus according to scripture a Hindu is incomplete without a wife and male children. Some of the salient features of Hindi marriage are as follows:

- i) **Monogamy:** It is significant that monogamy (marriage of one man and one woman at a time) is the usual form of marriage in Hinduism. Polygamy was also found among some Hindus based on local customs. However, various social reform movements led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Dayanand Saraswati etc. took place in India against such practices; and the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 permits only monogamous form of marriage.
- ii) **Endogamy:** The Hindus maintain the religious and caste endogamy. Though legally permitted inter-caste and inter religious marriages are very few and confined mostly among the literate sections and in the urban areas.
- iii) **Hypergamy:** According to the rule of hypergamy the status of the husband is always higher than the wife. The hypergamy emerged based on the marriage among different sub-sections of a caste or sub-caste rather than between the castes. The ancient Hindu literature permits hypergamy in the form of *anuloma* whereby a girl is married to upper sub-caste. However, it does not permit *pratiloma* whereby a girl marries a boy from lower sub-caste.
- iv) **Gotra Exogamy:** Hindu maintain the gotra exogamy. *Gotra* indicates the common ancestor of a clan or a family. People with common ancestor are not allowed to intermarry. In recent years *gotra* exogamy is defined in terms of prohibition of marriage within five generations on the mother's side and seven generations on the father's side. However, there are significant variations with regard to the practice of gotra exogamy between the Hindus in the North and the South India. In South India cross-cousin marriages are allowed, while it is strictly forbidden in

North India. (For details you may like to see the Unit No. 8 & 9 of Block 2, ESO-02).

19.4.3 Family

Grihastha Ashrama is the stage of family life of a Hindu. The main objective of the marriage is reflected in the Grihastha ashram. Here a Hindu perform his *Dharma* and *Karma* for the continuity of the family and his salvation. Thus, the ideal typical family of the Hindu is joint in nature where people of three generations usually live together. Hindu joint family is mostly patrilineal, patrilocal, co-residential and common property ownership and a commercial unit. This family is usually composed of a man and his wife, their adult sons and their wives and children. Some times some other close (even distant in many cases) relatives become members of the Hindu joint family. The oldest male member of the family is the head of the family. Here sex and age are the guiding principles of the familial hierarchy.

In recent years in the wake of rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, spread of commercial values, education and mass-communication and implementation of progressive land reforms laws of the joint family system has been under severe threat in India. Indeed, nuclearisation has been the major trend. However, the sentiments of the joint family still continues among most of the Hindu which are expressed on the occasion of family ritual, patterns of ownership of property and in the exigencies of these families. (For details you may see Unit No. 6 Block 2 ESO-02 and Unit No. 7 Block 2 ESO-06).

19.4.4 Inheritance

Traditionally the *Mitakshara* system of inheritance was practiced in most parts of India (except for Bengal and Assam). According to this system a son has a birth right on father's ancestral property and the father cannot dispose this property in a way which can be detrimental to the interest of the son. However, according to the *Dayabaga* (applicable to Bengal and Assam) system of inheritance the father is the absolute owner of this property and he has the right to dispose it according to his will.

Traditionally females are not coparcenary. The customary practices only provide maintenance rights to females. Women in the patrilineal society get some movable property as *stridhana* at the time of marriage.

The Hindu Succession Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 (Applicable to Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs) has established a uniform system of inheritance. According to this act a husband is legally responsible for the maintenance of his wife and children. The individual property of a male Hindu, dying intestate (having made no will), passes on equal share between his son, daughter, widow and mother. Male and female heirs have come to be treated as equal in matters of inheritance and succession. This act has also given a woman the right to inherit from the father and the husband. However, women have no right to coparcenary ancestral property by birth (cf. Unit 6.4.2, ESO-02).

19.4.5 Hindu Social Institutions

In Block 4 of ESO-03 you have learnt how Max Weber has located the stimuli of economic development within the ethics of religious belief system. To him economic development fostered in the Western World because of the rationalisation of religious ethics of Protestantism (especially of the Puritan sects) of Christianity. To him, however, such a process of rationalisation has not taken place in Hinduism. Rather he pointed out that the Hindu belief system, which centered around the doctrines of *Dharma*, *Karma* and *Moksha*, and the social institution of the Hinduism produced

an irrational and 'otherworldly' social atmosphere. This phenomena hindered the economic development and the growth of industrial capitalism. However, the validity of the thesis of Max Weber was challenged by many scholars. For example Milton Singer (1968) pointed out that Hinduism has not hindered the growth of the same. The traditional business families in India have generated the required capital from family sources and their traditional expertise are also used for economic development. Scholars also pointed out that Hindu social institutions and belief systems have enormous elements of rationalisation and this-worldly attitudes required for economic modernisation. However, these elements of rationalisation and this-worldly attitudes are to be understood in the context of the changing need of Hinduism in particular and the society in India in general.

Activity 1

Interview at least 10 heads of the family belonging to different caste groups among Hindus. Collect information on the marriage practices as practised by them in their marriage and in the marriage of their children. Based on your finding write a note of about two pages on the "Features of Hindu Marriage: A Field Observation". Exchange your note with the co-learners of the Study Centre, if possible.

19.5 HINDUISM IN THE HISTORICAL SETTINGS

Hinduism has undergone a process of transformation over millions of years. The Vedic ritualism and Upanishadic philosophies played significant roles in Hinduism. Indeed transformation started in Hinduism with the message of Bhagavad Gita, which added the notion of *Bhakti* (devotion) in Hinduism. Hinduism acquired new dimensions in Bhakti cult. Besides the Bhakti cult, Hinduism has also to encounter with forces of Islam and the West. Let us examine Hinduism in the context of these broad social and historical processes.

19.5.1 Bhakti

There are various important facets of the Bhakti movement. Let us begin with the important facets that the message of Gita initiated.

i) Bhagavad Gita

Bhagavad Gita recognised the Vedic rituals and Upanishadic philosophy of knowledge as the legitimate ways to attain self-realisation which is the goal of life of an ideal Hindu. Hence to the paths of *Karma* (action) and *Jnana* (knowledge) the Gita added the path of Bhakti (devotion). This revived the elements of theistic elements in Hinduism. "After describing the ways of action, knowledge and devotion, the Bhagavad Gita enjoins the seekers to abandon all three ways to seek refuge in God so as to be free of the burden of all moral imperfections. This call to total surrender is as much intellectual as it is devotional" (Madan, 1989: 127).

ii) Alvars

The devotional movement for the first time flourished in South India towards the end of eighth century A.D. among the non-Brahmin groups which expressed the strong desire for theism after Jainism and Buddhism had spread all over India. The followers of this movement were known as the *Alvars* (that is those with an intuitive knowledge of God who were engaged in complete immersion in Him). They questioned the *dharma*s of caste and gender. They tried to exceed such relationships through personal devotion to deities like Siva and Vishnu. The *Alvars* emphasised on the constant companionship of God. However, they expressed their

preoccupation with *Viraha*, (separation) from God. *Nammalvar* was prominent among the Alvars who put forward the notion of devotion as assumption of femininity by the devotee in relation to God *Vishnu* (*ibid*, 128). Hence love of women for Vishnu symbolises the love of the devotees for the supreme soul, the God.

iii) Jayadeva, Srichaitanya and Mira

The love stories of unmarried Krishna (reincarnation of Vishnu) and Radha have got the central place in the Bhakti movement. It emphasised on total devotion to God as a means to self-realisation. In this movement Krishna is symbolised as the supreme soul and Radha as the individual soul. Jayadeva's *Gita Goyinda*, written on the eternal love of Radha and Krishna in the later part of 12th century, has spread all over the country. The origin of many of the Vaishnava sects is located in this movement. In the 16th century Srichaitanya in Bengal, Vallabha in Gujarat, Mira in Rajasthan were possessed with the love of Krishna. Bhakti movement got momentum in the given path of total devotion to Krishna as followed by them.

iv) Sura Das, Tulsidas and Kabir

It is significant that intense religious devotion was also expressed the luminaries of medieval Bhakti Movement in the songs of Sura Das on Krishna (in Brijbhasha), Tuls Das on Rama (in Avadhi) and in Kabir's devotionism. "Tulsi's bhakti was that of a servant (*dasa*) devoted to the service of his divine master. The love of God for the devotee, who dwells on his own imperfection and therefore on divine grace, is a central theme of Tulsi's sublime poetry...Kabir's devotionism was centered on a personalised god in human form, however, but on an abstract and formless conception of the divine. (Madan, 1989: 131). You will learn more about Bhakti Movement in Unit 28 of Block 6 of this course.



Saints in Hinduism often wrote and sang their religious and spiritual compositions.

19.5.2 Encounter with Islam

Hinduism has been responding to the external religious influences since the classical period. It has responded to distinctive Islamic and the Western influences for almost ten and five centuries respectively. Let us mention here some of the impacts of the encounter of Hinduism with Islam.

It is very difficult to assess the impact of Islam on Hinduism since it has various dimensions. Hinduism dealt with the periodic outbreaks of violence since the time of the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni into North-west India (977-1030). These invasions led to the development of Hindu ideal of territorial kingdom “as the mode for the protection of Hindu values”. Hence the defence of Hindu traditions against Islam came first from the Rajputs of Rajasthan, then the rulers and successors of Vijayanagar Kingdom of South India (1333-18th century) and the Marathas in Maharashtra from late sixteenth century to the close of 18th century. As an immediate impact of the dominance of the Muslim rule “conservative and puritanical tendencies gained momentum in orthodox Hinduism” particularly with regard to the strictness of the caste and purity of women. However, there are many evidences to show that over the years various Muslims themes and features have been incorporated into popular Hindu myths and rituals. Significantly while the orthodox, popular and the domestic form of Hinduism thus drew in on themselves, Hindu sectarian traditions multiplied under the influence of Islam. Notable of these were that of the *Bhakti* cult of Chaitanya in Bengal and sant tradition of North India by Kabir (1440-1518) from Banaras and Nanak (1469-1539) from Punjab. Kabir and Nanak propagated devotion to one God “that combined aspects of Islamic *Sufism* and Hindu *Bhakti*. They brought in Hinduism an exclusivist monotheism like that found in the tradition of Islam. Their teachings rejected both the caste system and idol worship. Guru Nanak laid the foundation of Sikhism that synthesised philosophies of Islam and Hinduism.

Emperor Akbar in his *Din-Elahi* synthesised Islam and Hinduism. He propagated religious tolerance. However, his successors abandoned his path and followed *expansionist* policies. These policies of expansion aroused resistance from the heirs of the Vijaynagar and the Rajpur Kingdoms, and also from the Sikhs and the Marathas. ‘The seeds of a nationalist vision of Hinduism may be traced through these movements (Hiltebeitel 1987: 358). (We shall discuss some related aspects of this issue in the last section of this Block).

19.5.3 Encounter with the West

Hinduism has been widely influenced by West and the beliefs and practices of Christianity. Various reform movements started in Hinduism in the 19th century as the direct impact of Christianity. The *Brahmo Samaj* was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1928 which advocated monotheism and rejected the caste order, idolatry and animal sacrifice.

Activity 2

Make a list of 10 religious organisations with the help of knowledgeable people. Your list should have a few sentences about the purpose and the goals of these organisations and how they differ from each other.

The *Arya Samaj* was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. This movement rejected the Puranic Hinduism and attempted the return of Vedic Hinduism. According to them image worship has no sanction of Veda. They also advocated monotheism. They denied the religious base of the caste and the Varna.

Rama Krishna Mission was founded in 186. Swami Vivekananda carried forward

the activities of this mission on the line of traditional Hindu values. The followers of this mission uphold strong tradition of Bhakti and tantric strains along with Vedanta philosophy and Ramakrishna's experiences of the oneness of all religions through visions not only of Hindu deities but of Jesus and Allah". (*ibid* 360). Rama Krishna Mission aims the propagation of a modern and activist version of Hinduism. It is engaged in a variety of cultural, educational and social welfare activities and has branches in cities throughout the world. The Rama Krishna Mission, modelled after the European Christian missions of the nineteenth century in India, has itself provided a model for numerous other Hindu organisations (Srinivas, 192: 130).

To eradicate some evil customs and practices as traditionally followed in Hinduism several religious organisations came into being during the British rule. These organisations also took up the task of the promotion of education and social reform. As a result of prolonged contact with West various significant changes have taken place in Hinduism. Some of these changes can be listed here:

- a) Activist streak in Hinduism has received significant attention and the Bhagavad Gita has become the single most important book of the Hindus.
- b) Leaders of various Hindu religious institutions are now undertaking various social reform and welfare activities viz. running of schools, colleges, hospitals etc.
- c) The idea of purity and pollution, which permeated daily life, life cycle rituals, and the intercaste relations, particularly by the higher castes, are rapidly weakening, especially in the urban areas. A caste-free Hinduism may emerge in future out of these changes. The movement of caste-free Hinduism is supported by the cult of the new godmen (e.g. Sri Saibaba etc.) in Hinduism.
- d) Another change has been that of the "emergence of militant forms of Hinduism, partly in response to the evangelical activities of the missionaries among the Harijans and tribals, and to the appearance of separationist tendencies among certain religious and ethnic minorities in India (Srinivas 1992: 130).

It is significant to note here that, Hinduism has also influenced other religions in India. Many of the important traits of Hinduism are found among other religious groups also. The caste system can be put here as a ready reference. The caste divisions also exist among the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and the Jains. Indeed, conversion to any other religions does not necessarily dissolve the caste order. Occupational specialisation, caste endogamy, social distance etc. are practised even after conversion.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Explain how Bhagavad Gita revived the theistic elements in Hinduism? Answer in about six lines.
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
- ii) Mention a few important impacts of the encounter of Hinduism with Islam. Use five lines to answer.

.....

 iii) Which one of the following is not an impact of the West on Hinduism?

- 1) promotion of education
- 2) promotion of social reform and welfare activities
- 3) weakening of the idea of purity and pollution in the urban areas
- 4) none of the above.

19.6 HINDUISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

In recent years Hinduism has acquired various new dimensions most important of which have been the efforts towards internationalisation of Hinduism, emergence of various personalised cults in Hinduism and politicisation of Hinduism. In the following sub-sections we shall be dealing with these aspects with the help of some caste studies.

19.6.1 Internationalisation of Hinduism

There have been numerous efforts for internationalisation of Hinduism. The Rama Krishna Mission and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) have made important efforts in this matter. In Unit 28 of this course the activities of Rama Krishna Mission have been discussed at length. In this section we shall discuss the case of ISKCON.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

The devotional Hinduism with its missionary aspiration was spread over the U.K., U.S.A., Canada and other Western Nations by the followers of ISKCON, popularly known as *Hare Krishna* cult. It has become an international movement with numerous centres all over the world, especially in the English speaking world. The founder of this society was A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, a Bengali by birth. he was initiated by his *guru* Bhaktivedanta Saraswati to the path of *Bhakti* in 1922 in the devotional line of Chaitanya. He gave up the householder's life in 1954 and became an ascetic by 1959. Bhaktivedanta Swami went to USA in 1965, to spread the message of Srimad Bhagavatam there in the USA. Slowly his followers grew in New York, Los Angeles, Berkeley, Boston and Montreal. Bhaktivedanta Swami established various centres of ISKCON in those places with its headquarters in Los Angeles. There he printed more than fifty volumes of translations and original works of his guru.

Recitation of the name of Lord Sri Krishna was considered instrumental for salvation by the followers of ISKCON movement. Hence they performed public chanting of the *Hare Krishna Mantra*. Thus over the years the Krishna Consciousness movement has been visible in the English speaking world.

Bhaktivedanta has introduced several practices for the ISKCON followers viz. wearing of traditional Indian saffron dress and shaving of heads by the male devotees and wearing of saris by the female devotees, early rising and timely devotional services etc. ISKCON has spread over to every continent of the globe.

Bhaktivedanta expired in Vrindavan in 1977. Just before his death he appointed eleven disciples as initiating guru to keep the Chaitanya chain of disciples unbroken and missionise the rest of the world. By early 1980s ISKCON branches grew rapidly in many overseas areas, where they found more tolerant environments (Shiva, 1987: 267).

It is necessary to point out that ISKCON is only one example and that Hinduism based cults have spread all over the world.

19.6.2 Individualised Cults

Hinduism has been a breeding ground for the emergence of personalised religious cults in recent years. Some of these cults have received wide attention from their followers. Satya Sai Baba, Acharya Rajnees, Muktananda etc. are prominent among them. It is not possible to discuss all of them in this unit. Here for your specific understanding of this phenomenon we shall be discussing the cult of Satya Sai Baba as a case study.

Satya Sai Baba

In contemporary India Satya Sai Baba is the most famous deity saint in Hinduism. He is worshipped by his followers as the *Avatar*. His followers have increased tremendously in recent years.

Satya Sai Baba was born in a village called Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh. He belonged to the *Raju* Caste and was named Satyanarayana by his parents. He was fond of *bhajan* (devotional songs) and performing of Hindu mythological dramas during his young and school days.

As claimed by Satya Sai Baba and accepted and propagated by his followers Satya Sai Baba is the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi in Maharashtra. He is the embodiment of Lord Shiva and is consort Shakti in one soul. Lawrence Babb writes that Sathya Sai Baba's assertion of divine status is expressed in first person; he states it boldly and repeatedly. He has come in the present age of wickedness and misery, he says, not merely to alleviate individual misfortunes (though he does this for his devotees), but to set the whole world right, to usher in a "Sai Age". In the form of Shirdi Sai Baba his mission was to establish Hindu-Muslim unity, in the present incarnation he will re-establish Vedic and Shastric religion. On his rebirth as Prem Sai, he will be born in Karnataka and bring all his work to completion (Babb 1991: 284). The followers of Sai Baba are not only the Hindus. There are Muslims, Christians, and others among his prominent followers.

Though he is the manifestation of all gods and goddesses, his dominant identity is that of Shiva. He is portrayed in association with Shiva. *Mahashivratri* is the most important festival of this cult. In this festival Satya Sai Baba materialises vast quantities of *vibhuti* (Sacred Ash) from his hand and *Shivalingam* (which symbolises God Shiva) from his mouth.

This cult has rapidly attracted a large number following not only in India but also abroad. Majority of his devotees are from urban middle classes. His devotees recognise him as "Bhagwan". Baba attracts followers by his personal charisma and the miracles he often performs. He also cures the illness of his devotees. However, Baba often maintains distance from his followers living in his "personal constituency" and giving only occasional darshan.

Some basic features of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings are as follows: He does not impose strict rules of conduct on his devotees. Moderate and vegetarian diets, avoidance of alcohol and smoking, practice of householder's life and celibvacy after

age of fifty, tolerance, gentleness and kindness towards others, non-violence are encouraged by him. He also suggests meditations of the God (who is in fact Baba) for inner peace. A significant aspect of Baba's teaching is that he considers the influence of Western culture as inimical to India. To him Indian folk traditions should be adhered to. Thus he professes a cultural nationalism.

He recognises inherent inequalities existing in the society. Though he has discontent against the present day state, he does not advocate radical change in the existing economic and social institutions.

Social service is an important aspect of the cult of Satya Sai Baba. Feeding the poor, assisting authorities in the relief work, expansion of education, child development are some of the important areas of social service of the cult.

What is sociologically important here is that Baba attracts a large numbers of followers through the performance of his charisma repeatedly. He also legitimates his position in term of the Hindu notion and rebirth and karma. He, however has incorporated the missionary zeal of social service in his regular activities. The charisma and legitimacy of Sai Baba is accepted not only by the common followers but also by some of the prominent social, political and business elites of the country.

19.6.3 Politicisation of Hinduism

In Hinduism there has always been a tradition of tolerance and hospitality to other religions. These elements of tolerance and hospitality have paved the way to declare India a secular state. It is significant that in the nineteenth century there were the revivalist tendencies and attempts in Hinduism advocating a return to the *Vedas* and occasionally Indian nationalism was expressed itself in the Hindu idiom. However,



Satya Sai Baba is a most famous deity saint in contemporary Hinduism.

during the British rule in India there emerged a group of westernised elite which “while rooted in the country and its tradition, was committed to independence, democracy, egalitarianism and secularism. It is this elite that not only declared India a secular state but also attempted whole heartedly to establish the principle of equity of man (Srinivas and Shah 1972: 364).

The Constitution has declared India a “Sovereign Secular Socialistic Democratic Republic”. In the process of democratic functioning of the state and the society our religious life has been widely politicised in recent years. Politicisation has emerged as a pervasive process in post-independence India. Religion is not free from this process. In recent years Hinduism has been politicised for certain political ends. In general, protection of the interest of the Hindus, creation of Hindu Rashtra etc. have been the major objectives of such a process of politicisation of Hinduism.

While discussing politicisation of Hinduism, the activities of RSS and its front organisations are generally widely discussed. Let us know briefly the origin and activities of the RSS. The RSS was founded in Maharashtra in 1925-26 by Dr. K.B. Hedgewar. The RSS operates at the political level through its various front organisations viz., Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Bharatiya Majdoor Sangh, Vidyarthi Parisad etc. In recent years it has been using the wider front organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parisad. In the passage of time the RSS has acquired well-defined ideology and organisational strength. As articulated by its second guru, Guru Golwalkar the ideology of the RSS is explicitly represented by Hindu nationalism. Creation of a Hindu Rashtra and bringing of all round glory to the Hindu Rashtra are the main objectives of the RSS. Golwalkarji writes:

The non-Hindu population of Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and languages, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of Hindu race and culture, i.e. they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age long tradition but also must cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead, in a word, they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country wholly subordinate to the Hindu nation...”. Ideologically the RSS equates Hindus with the Aryans and its characteristic Vedic age as the Golden Age of India.

In recent years India has visualised a considerable increase of the efforts towards politicisation of Hinduism. There has been the growth of fundamentalism as well. M.M. Srinivas has made an important observation on this emerging phenomena. To him: in the last few decades Hinduism has had to cope with certain momentous changes such as the division of Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan, the latter being theocratic state... That period also saw the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel and Buddhist states in Sri Lanka and Burma. It also witnessed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in a vast region extending from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. How can Hinduism remain immune to all these forces and events? To him fundamentalism in Hinduism has grown as a matter of challenge faced by it, because of the growth of fundamentalism in other religions and also in the neighbouring countries (Srinivas 1992: 16).

Whatever may be the reason for the growth of fundamentalism in Hinduism, the facts remain that there has been deliberate tendency to politicise Hinduism as a means to gain power. However, reaction of the average Hindus towards such development is of great significance. Through democratic process they have upheld the noble tradition of tolerance and hospitality of Hinduism and the secular basis of the nation.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Activities of the ISKCON was confined mainly to

- 1) the French speaking world
 - 2) the English speaking world
 - 3) the Hindi speaking world
 - 4) the Non English speaking world
- ii) As claimed by Satya Sai Baba, he is the embodiment of
- 1) Lord Shiva
 - 2) Goddess Shakti
 - 3) Both of Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti
 - 4) None of the above

19.7 LET US SUM UP

Hinduism is the oldest of all great religions of the world. It has encountered various forces in various historical settings. However the central belief system has remained eternal to Hinduism. We discussed in this unit the central belief system of Hinduism as reflected in the notions of *Brahman*, *Atman*, *Dharma*, *Karma*, *Moksha*, and the notion of purity and pollution. We also discussed the basic cults and deities in Hinduism.

The social institutions of marriage, family and inheritance are also discussed in this unit. The Bhakti Movement in Hinduism and the encounter of Hinduism with Islam and the West are discussed at length. Lastly we discussed the emerging facets of Hinduism. Here we discussed the effort towards internationalisation of Hinduism, emergence of individual cults in Hinduism and politicisation of Hinduism based on some case studies.

19.8 KEY WORDS

Altruism	: Unselfish concern for the welfare of others.
Ashrama	: There are four well-defined stages of life in Hinduism. These are <i>Brahmacharya</i> (for youth), <i>Grihastha</i> (for adult), <i>Vanaprastha</i> (for middle aged) and <i>Sanyasa</i> (for old aged).
Case study	: A sociological method of analysing and presenting data using specific examples.
Bhaktism	: Religions ideology of devotionism.
Gotra	: Exogamous groups indicating common ancestor of that group, family or clan.
Ritual	: A systematic and repetitive system of actions directed towards a specific target or religions goal.
Stridhana	: Movable property given to women at the time of marriage.
Varna	: Broad ascribed status groups in Hinduism. There are four <i>Varnas</i> in Hinduism—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra.

19.9 FURTHER READINGS

Besant, A. 1985. *Seven Great Religions*. The Theosophical Publishing House: Madras.

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

Prabhu, P.H. 1919. *Hindu Social Organisation*. People Publishing House: Bombay.

Srinivas, M.N. and A.M. Shah, 1972. "Hinduism", In the — *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. Macmillan and Free Press: New York.

19.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) 4)

ii) 4)

iii) 4)

Check Your Progress 2

i) Bhagvad Gita suggests the paths of action (Karma), knowledge and devotion for self-realisation. Bhagavad Gita finally enjoins the seekers to abandon all these paths and to seek refuge in God so as to be free from the burden of all imperfections.

ii) (a) As an immediate impact conservative and puritanical tendencies gained momentum in Hinduism, (b) Sectarian traditions multiplied in Hinduism (c) Muslim themes were incorporated in popular Hindu myths and rituals.

iii) 4)

Check Your Progress 3

i) 2)

ii) 3)