
UNIT 30 SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PILGRIMAGES

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30.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at introducing you to the meaning and nature of pilgrimages. After studying this unit you will be able to

- understand the meaning and nature of pilgrimage as an expression of the religious sentiment — as both an individual's behaviour and a socio-cultural institution
- appreciate the social significance of pilgrimages, i.e. the effect of pilgrimage on the socio-economic life of a people and on social solidarity and unit among the people
- have a comprehensive idea of how pilgrimage has evolved through history in response to change in the social, economic and cultural spheres, specially in India.

30.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we begin with the question : what is a pilgrimage ? We then go on to define what a pilgrim is. Following this we provide descriptions of pilgrimages in different traditions. We then go on to examine pilgrimages in various contexts and features, including temple going. We then examine the merit (*punya*) producing aspects of pilgrimage. Next we discuss the institutional aspect of a pilgrimage and the sacredness associated with it. Following this we examine pilgrimage centres and their liminality and the nature of auspiciousness in pilgrimage.

Next to this section is the one on the socio-historical background of pilgrimages. This examines the typology of pilgrimages and gives the various interpretations of the meaning of the word *Haji*. It also examines continuity of pilgrimages in India. We also examine the social significance of pilgrimages. We examine pilgrimage in the arts and education, material culture and economy, and the socio-political aspect. We begin with the social integration aspect of pilgrimage.

30.2 WHAT ARE PILGRIMAGES ?

All major religions of the world have laid great emphasis on the sacredness of certain localities and have either enjoined or recommended with great insistence, pilgrimages to them. These places are famous for miracles and the inspiration for religious life of the faithful or the revivification of faith. A religious believer in any culture may feel the call of such a place which may lie at a distance and resolve to journey there, i.e., to undertake a pilgrimage to the sacred site.

39.2.1 Definition of Pilgrimage and Pilgrim

Most people understand pilgrimage as a journey to a holy place or shrine, either in the pilgrim's native land or abroad. The object of pilgrimage is to obtain some benefit — material, symbolic, moral or spiritual — which the sanctity of the chosen spot is believed to confer. A pilgrimage may be undertaken because such a journey is considered *meritorious*. The idea of the acquisition of divine favour, either directly or through a saint, is generally associated with such a journey. The benefits expected out of the *labour or travail involved in the journey or expedition* to the destination of pilgrimage, i.e., holy place, may range from the satisfaction of mundane interests to the highest spiritual attainment. But the journey has a root in the religious beliefs of the person(s) undertaking it. The journey to the sacred spot is always associated with some religious motive or motives which are, in one way or another, religious ideas and beliefs.

From the above definitions it is absolutely clear that two significant features which do recur in pilgrimages are

- i) sacred places and
- ii) the act of travelling or journeying itself.

“Pilgrimages are sacred journeys extraordinary” (Saraswati, 1985 : 103). True, pilgrimage as practised in India and elsewhere is guided by the highly diversified motives of the pilgrims.

Pilgrimages are not mindless movements or migrations either. They are voluntary and individual, *unlike the mindless collective migrations* familiar in ancient and medieval times. Each is a personal act, following a personal decision, and resulting in a wide range of significant personal experience. Pilgrimage is thus a journey in quest of some ultimate value or some spiritual experience. Is every visit to a nearby holy place a pilgrimage ? For answer to this question see Box 30.01.

Box 30.01

Is a visit made daily or occasionally by a devotee to the local or next-door shrine a pilgrimage ? No, it is just a ‘journey’ to a sacred spot. Pilgrimage or pilgrim's journey usually covers long distances and extends over a considerable duration of time. Indeed pilgrimage implies a movement away from home and the severing, though temporarily, of the enduring bonds which bind the individual there. A Hindu pilgrim is a “Yatri” (one who

goes). The pilgrim's journey begins amid the entanglements of the domestic social setting. The pilgrim then moves out and away from these, across distance, to a place that is set apart from the complex problems of everyday mundane life. The journey to the pilgrimage centre provides the opportunity for preparation of the devotee's mind for the proper attitudes needed in the pilgrimage centre.

30.2.2 Individualistic Aspect of Pilgrimage

Notwithstanding the collective aspect, associated with organisation of pilgrimages (discussed in sub-section 30.4.1), various studies of pilgrimages in Hindu, Buddhist or Christian cultures have revealed the *individualistic aspect* of pilgrimages. Hindu pilgrimage, more specifically, Kashi pilgrimage, is essentially a personal quest for salvation both in space and in time. All rituals are aimed at earning the merits which are not collectively shared. **The merit of a pilgrimage is earned individually; and moksa, the ultimate aim of pilgrimage is salvation of the individual soul.** Pilgrimage is an affair of the individual. There are, of course, cases where motives for going on pilgrimage originate in a general atmosphere of piety, devotion and communal and social loyalty. But very often a pilgrimage is "the result of a vow. Something is wrong, or some danger threatening, or some good things highly desired are missing". And, hence the journey (*ibid.*, 255). The pilgrim goes to the holy place in pursuit of some personally desired end. Buddhist pilgrims rituals of circumambulation (*pradakshina*) of the sacred shrines of the relics of Buddha is symbolic of a journey representing personal spiritual ascent.

There are specific motives concerned with mundane existence. They usually involve a commitment or vow to the deity whose blessing is sought for the solution of a problem which is of great concern to the pilgrim, e.g., the desire for the birth of a male offspring. The second category of motives consists of earning religious merit. It is hard to define such motives. It may be interpreted as the desire to purify the soul rather than to pray for wealth or success in business. Each pilgrimage has a related sacred complex. Turner (1974 : 189) views pilgrimages as processes or flows of activities and observes that "pilgrimages will constitute objectively a connected network of processes each involving a journey to and from a particular site. Such sites (are) places where, according to believers, some manifestation of divine or supernatural power had occurred, what Mircea Eliade would call a 'theophany' (Turner 1974 : 189).

30.2.3 Sacredness of Pilgrimage

The sacred is a category of things and actions set apart as holy and entitled to reverence. Such a category is often held to represent symbolically the key values of a society. The sacred is often understood in contrast with the profane. What is profane is ordinary, not sacred. Emile Durkheim (see Block 1, Unit 3, p. 42-43 of ESO-05) declares that all religions divide the universe into two opposed realms—sacred and profane and establish rules distinguishing the former from the latter. Dichotomy of the sacred and the profane in absolutist terms has been subjected to wide-ranging empirical and conceptual criticism. For instance, the idea of polar opposition between the sacred and the profane is to be applied in the Indian context with *caution*. For, Indian religious thought is hierarchical (in the sense of encompassing of the contrary) rather than simply dualistic (recognising the binary opposition). That is the profane, though the opposite of the sacred, is included in the latter and thus subordinated to it (Madan, 1991 : 3). Even in a place of pilgrimage like Kashi which is renowned for its sacredness, "it is difficult to make clear-cut distinction between the sacred and the secular in its organization of space, in the performance of its rituals and in the profession of ritual specialists".

Two illustrations may be given. The unseemly bargaining and even unscrupulous dealings of the Brahman priests with the pilgrims for extorting money from the pilgrims in temples or during the performance of rituals at the *ghats* of the Ganges are a common scene in Kashi. The other notable fact is the doms' custodianship of the sacred fire required for of the deceased including the Brahmans to ensure their salvation.

Box 30.02

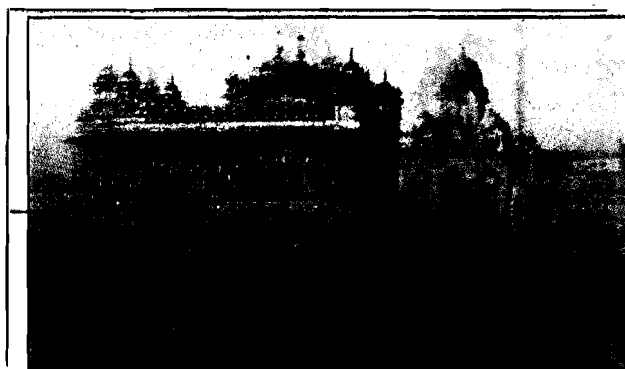
The quality of sacredness characterizes various aspects of the journey to and activities in pilgrimage centres. Liminality of pilgrimage centres becomes clear when it is likened to a *ford*. A ford is a shallow stream where it is possible *to cross safely on foot*, in a vehicle, etc., and without using a boat. Indeed, the Sanskrit equivalent for a centre of pilgrimage is *tirtha*. The Sanskrit word, *tirtha*, is translated as a passage, way road, ford, stairs for landing or descent into a river, bathing place, place of pilgrimage. *Tirtha* has other connotations and usages as well. But the plurality of the uses of *tirtha* shares a *symbolic value of holiness* prescribed to certain exalted categories of place, state or person. The significance of *symbolism* lies in the notion of "crossing over" (transition or passage). The notion of fording or crossing over, implies a crossing place — a *liminal*, media location between two realms (of the sacred and the profane). A *tirtha* is such a place, and in symbolic terms. *so is every place of pilgrimage*. Similarly, a learned, purified, initiated or devout individual rises above mundane society to stand between man and God, and so is able to act as a point of intersection and, therefore, fording.

The sacredness of the site accounts for the great concern with purity among pilgrims. The pilgrims must remove the taints of impurity from their body and mind. In case of Hindu pilgrims, for instance, the journey is itself a purification by austerities. For the quality of sacredness attached to pilgrimage and pilgrim centres, see Box 30.02. Also see, the next sub-section, 30.4.2 to find out the difference between being sacred and being auspicious.

30.2.4 Auspiciousness in Pilgrimage

Auspiciousness is an important element in pilgrimage. Auspiciousness/inauspiciousness is distinct from purity/impurity. *The former refers primarily to events* and ultimately to life itself as an event-structure. Purity-impurity is basically an attribute of objects.

A *tirtha-sthana* or place of pilgrimage of the Hindus, located on the bank of a river or body of water, is regarded as holy and a pilgrimage (*yatra*) to it is considered auspicious. The holiness of the place and the auspiciousness of the visit are greatly enhanced, if two or more rivers merge there (Madan 1987 : 52). *Auspiciousness*



The Golden Temple at Amritsar; the most holy temple of the Sikh faith.

implies benediction and well-being. An auspicious or *subha* time, or event or conduct is considered conducive to well-being.

Pilgrims attach great importance to objects or persons supposed to bring about subha or auspiciousness even if such objects or persons may suffer from impurity. Thus the pilgrims to the temple of Jagannath at Puri are told that viewing the circumambulating of devadasis is auspicious, i.e., these actions result into well-being. Some worshippers in the temple pick the dust from the feet of the dancing devadasis, or roll on the ground where they have danced, in the hope of attaining well-being, of winning divine grace (Marglin 1985 : 109). For, they are told that the devadasis are the living embodiments of Jagannatha's consort, Lakshmi, indeed, the devadasis have the exclusive right to sing and dance in the outer sanctum of the temple at various times of the day and the year. **They are associated with many other auspicious rites and events in the temple complex. They are, therefore, venerated by the pilgrims.**

But the devadasis are denied entry into the inner sanctum of Jagannatha's temple. This prohibition is linked with the devadasis' status as courtesans. Their body is thus impure. But the sight or worship of the devadasis is auspicious for the pilgrims (Marglin 1985 : 35).

30.2.5 Pilgrimages in Different Religious Traditions

A brief description of pilgrimages as they are practised by the followers of certain major religions may help us better understand the nature and functioning of pilgrimages.

30.3 SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PILGRIMAGES

Pilgrimages have arisen in different periods of history and have taken different paths. Pilgrimage traditions vary from one culture to another. We shall first examine Turners' typology of pilgrimages through history. The typology is based mainly on the experiences of the west and Christianity, though its universal validity is claimed. We shall then see the changing interpretations of *hajj* through time. Finally, we shall discuss the continuity and changes in the meaning and practice of pilgrimage in India.



Prayer congregation in front of a mosque with three prominent domes, and two flanking

30.3.1 Turners' Typology of Pilgrimages in History

Victor and Edith Turner have attempted a typology of pilgrimages depending mainly on European history and history of Christian pilgrimages (Turner and Turner, 1978).

- i) *Archaic Pilgrimage*: Archaic pilgrimage traditions have come down from very ancient times, and little or nothing is known of their foundation. Archaic pilgrimages are those pilgrimages which bear quite evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols'. Turner and Turner cite Glastonbury, Chalma in Mexico, Croagh Patrick in Ireland and Pandharpur in India. Pandharpur is included in this category because "its equivocal deity Vithova Bhave may well have Dravidian, pre-Indo European associations" (Turner and Turner, 1978 : 18).
- ii) *Prototypical Pilgrimages*: Pilgrimages established by the founder of a religion by his or her first disciples or important evangelists of his faith may be called prototypical. Examples are: Jerusalem and Rome (Christianity), Mecca (Islam), Banaras and Mount Kailas (Hinduism), Bodh Gaya and Saranath (Buddhism).
- iii) *High-period Pilgrimage*: In the hey-day of a pilgrimage tradition an elaborate shrine, crowded with symbols is created. In the middle ages when the growth of Muslim power in the Mediterranean hampered Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the loss was compensated by the creation of shrines all over Europe. Chartres, Canterbury, Walsingham, Compostela, Loreto, Assisi, Czestochowa, etc., are important examples. Eventually, at many European centres routinization and decline set in and meaning was lost in the jungle of symbolic objects and rites. Hence during the era of Reformation and the era of Puritanism many of them like Walsingham became targets of iconoclasts and were suppressed.
- iv) *Modern Pilgrimages*: All over the world in the last two centuries a new type of pilgrimage characterized by "a highly devotional tone and the fervent personal piety of their adherents" has developed. This modern pilgrimage is "deeply involved with mass technological and scientific culture". Pilgrims travel by automobile and airplane. **Pilgrimage centres publish newspapers and pamphlets. The catchment areas of modern pilgrimages are great and flourishing urban industrial cities.** However, the message of the shrine is "still traditional, at variance with the values of today". Both apparitional and saint-centred pilgrimage abound in Europe as well as in other parts of the modern world, e.g. Japan or Israel.

30.3.2 Pilgrimages in India : Continuity and Change

India is well known for the antiquity and continuity of her institution of pilgrimage. All sections of its population attach importance of the institutions. For example, the



A collage of pilgrimage centres in India.

hajj is the only pilgrimage enjoined by the Quran the Muslims in India and Pakistan visit many pilgrim centres. The veneration of tombs is against the 'Ulema law of orthodox Islam and the Wahabis prohibit any such pilgrimage. However, Bharati seems to be correct in pointing out that hardly more than 5 per cent of Indian and Pakistani Muslim population would pay heed to such stricture. "The Muslim practice is clearly a copy of the Hindu model, and the observances hardly differ from those of Hindi pilgrimage..." (Bharati 1963 : 142). Some modern Hindu sects like the Arya Samaj oppose the worship of tombs and shrines and pilgrimages to them. Prior to this, the monotheistic Lingayat sect of Mysore or the Sahajiya Vaishnavas of Bengal placing reliance on Bhakti or devotion expressed a similarly negative attitude to pilgrimage. Despite these objections to pilgrimage it remains an increasingly popular Hindu practice. The nature of Hindu pilgrimage is encased in the Sanskrit expression *tirtha-yatra*, which literally means "undertaking journey to river fords".

The glorification of *tirthas* and *tirthayatra* in the literature was prompted by a very practical consideration on the part of the priests : The offerings made at sacred places are sources of livelihood for the officiating priests. The latter are, therefore, extremely zealous to extol the merits of sacred places, particularly where they are the controlling priests. In this way numerous *sthalapuranas* and *mahatmas* has been essayed to bolster the attraction of scores of *tirthas*. The vested interests of the priests become markedly manifest in the institution of Gayawals in Gaya. A Gayawal claims the monopoly of performing rites for the pilgrims who he can contact as well as their descendants. He gets paid for this religious services. The *gadi* or *gaddi* (office) of a Gayawal where the account of the pilgrims and descendants is kept is thus a source of pecuniary gain. It can be inherited or bequeathed or offered as a gift. The right to a *gadi* became in many cases subject of litigation in the Privy Council (during the colonial period) and the High Court.

The sacred places or *tirthas* form important nodes, both as

- i) repositories of *traditional* Hinduism and as
- ii) propagators of *reinterpreted* values and beliefs.

The basic factor supporting this role is that Hindus from diverse regions visit these places and thus provide opportunity and convenience for the growth of such institutions. The sacred places during the major fairs become visible centres for the diffusion of new ideas, innovations and improvisations. Thus above religion, the spread of information with widespread cultural consequences receive vital impetus. It is mainly because modern means of mass transportation, communication and services have made it possible for a larger number of individuals to undertake what were once arduous pilgrimages. The number of pilgrims each year visiting for instance the well-known Hindu *tirthas* is to be reckoned in several millions. Specific occasions, such as the *Kumbhamela* at Hardwar and Allahabad attract literally countless devotees who are eager to bathe in the sacred rivers and partake in the religious celebrations.

It is nevertheless difficult to say from the increasing number of pilgrimages to holy sites whether the Hindus have become more or less religious in modern times. But it is an undeniable fact that new cults, built around saints, either alive or deceased, have come into existence in recent times. And, they have given a great impetus to pilgrimage and its prospects in the future. Agehananda Bharati mentions "two almost contemporary cases of intensified 'pilgrimization' due to the one-time presence of a saint" (Bharati 1963 : 150). One is the Kali temple at Dakshineswar near Calcutta which drew an increasing number of pilgrims from all over Bengal, from other parts of India and more recently from the United States and Europe as well. The importance of Dakshineswar to the pilgrims lies in the fact that Ramakrishna

complex at Dakshineswar. The other case of pilgrimage mentioned by Bharati relates to Ramana Maharishi's hermitage in Madras. Srinivas talks of Saibaba, a saint of modern India whose tomb in Shirdi in Maharashtra has become a favourite place for pilgrimage. The shrine of Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamatai is also visited though his cult is not as popular as the Saibaba cult (Srinivas 1970 : 132).

The national Government and various State Government in India increasingly recognize that vast numbers of people crowding pilgrimage centres can also be used as a convenient stage for the diffusion of new ideas bearing on the social, economic and political development of India. Take the example of *Ardha Kumbha* at Hardwar where the Health Department had set up a large (temporary) family-planning exhibition and a clinic, which familiarised thousands of pilgrims with family-planning devices. It even extended individual advice to numerous people. Similarly, the ministries of Agriculture and Industries had their exhibitions. The large number of pilgrims who assemble at sacred places with very little cost to the government can provide an inexpensive method for the dissemination of new ideas even to the remote corners of the country.

30.3.3 Hindu Pilgrimage

According to (Eck 1981 : 323-25) the Hindu tradition of tirtha has three principal sources.

- i) the Vedic tradition of rituals and sacrifices
- ii) the Upanishadic wisdom and knowledge tradition; and
- iii) the "locative strand" of piety of indigenous India.

In the Vedic and Sanskrit usage a *tirtha* means a 'crossing place' or 'ford' where one may cross over to the far shore of a river or to the far shore of the worlds of heaven. Hence, in the course of time, *tirtha* has come to refer to those places of pilgrimage where the crossing might be safely made.

The Hindu pilgrimage tradition recognises not merely the sacredness of specific spots but the holiness of vast regions or rather, the entire territory of India. The recognition of India as a sacred landscape woven together, north and south, east and west by the routes of pilgrims has created a powerful sense of India as Bharat Mata-Mother India (Eck 1981 : 336). If all the temples in a tirtha area polluted or demolished to the ground, the sanctity and efficacy of the *kshetra* shall remain unaffected and hence new temples may be built at new sites within its sacred territory. This is how the *tirthas* of the Hindus have survived numerous invasions and destructions (Saraswati, 1978 : 88).

Once the pilgrim's *puja* or direct communication with the deity in the shrine is over, a part of what the pilgrim has offered in *puja* is returned to him as *prasad* or blessed object. It is believed that to eat the blessed food, to wear a string, bangle or amulet or to carry a flower returned from the Puja will bring about the desired goal. These objects are ritually energized i.e., they are infused with the power of the deity by their contact with its image. The pilgrim seeks to continue the pure status attained in the *tirtha* as long as possible. Hence, *a Hindu pilgrim does not perform any ritual of desacralization prior to his or her departure from the tirtha.*

The openness of *tirthas* is illustrated in Saraswati's analysis of the diversity of performances and performers in Kashi (Saraswati, 1978). In Kashi one will find pilgrims belonging to all the different cultural traditions of Hindus — oral, textual and transcendental. Thus a potter pilgrim belonging to the oral cultural tradition

(*Laukik Sanskriti*) feels satisfied if a Brahman priest takes him to the shrine of Viswanath in Kashi for worship and to the river Ganga for a holy bath. The priest may take him to some other Brahmanic shrines also. But what is really important for him and what he does on his own is to visit the non-Brahmanic shrines of defied heroes, known as *beers*, such as *Agiya beer* and *Lahura beer*, and bathe in the *Krimikunda*, a sacred tank located in Keenaramka Astar.

It would appear that by generating an essentially continuous religious space, the circulation or “flow” of pilgrims to sacred places helps them transcend the great linguistic and regional-cultural differences of India.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) What are pilgrimages ? Use about five lines for your answer.

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- ii) Write a brief note about pilgrimage in Hinduism. Use about five lines for your answer.

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30.3.4 Buddhist Pilgrimage

Buddhist pilgrimage is a concrete example of the statement that mysticism is an “interior pilgrimage” and pilgrimage is “exteriorized mysticism”. The internal pilgrimage or meditation brings a Buddhist closer to the goal of *nirvana* (Pali, *Nibbana*). But the turning toward the Buddha who is iconically represented in the marks of his presence on earth or in relics is considered an important preliminary step along the path to enlightenment. In addition to bodily relics (Pali, *sariradhātu*), Buddhist tradition also recognises

- i) *paribhogikadhātu* or relics or objects that the Buddha used (e.g., his alms bowl) or marks (such as a footprint or shadow) that he left on earth and
- ii) *uddesikadhātu* which refer to routine reminders, such as images and stupas, known not to contain actual relics. *Stupas* or *chaityas* related to these indications of Buddha’s presence in the world have grown into centres of pilgrimage by Buddhists.

The secondary tradition makes Buddha himself determine the goals of pilgrimage

- i) where he was born (Lumbini in Nepal),
- ii) where *bodhi* or the highest insight or enlightenment was achieved. (*Bodh Gaya in India*).
- iii) where he “turned the wheel of the Law”, i.e. preached his first sermon (the Deer Park at Sarnath near Banaras), and
- iv) where he passed into the state of *nirvana* (Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh).

On these places, the Chinese pilgrims have reported at length. Today more than in the past centuries, these sites are being constantly visited by pilgrims from the Buddhist countries, and many different denominations belonging to several countries have built monasteries in these areas. The Indian Government built a rest house for pilgrims at Sanchi (Gwalior); the stupa connected with the Buddha's main disciples Sariputta and Mahamoggallana. The number of Buddhist Indian places of pilgrimage is limited. There is no unequivocally Buddhist tirtha in South India”. During the long period between the decline of Buddhism in India (the first millenium CE) and the late nineteenth century Buddhist pilgrimage was confined mainly to Buddhist lands outside India. The emerging importance of certain sites — the so-called sixteen great places in Sri Lanka and the twelve shrines related to the twelve-year cycle in northern Thailand — was associated primarily with the linking of political and moral communities in the world to a sacred Buddhist cosmos. *In mainland China there have been various pilgrimage sites, related to both Buddhism and Taoism. But with the advent of the Communist regime in 1949 pilgrimages in China seem to have disappeared.*

30.3.5 Jain Pilgrimage

Jains are “the pilgrims par excellence, ever on the move” (Madan, 1991: 18). Indeed, Jains hold the *sramana* or wandering ascetic to be the essential exemplar of the true path of renunciation. One important way to follow the ideal of the exemplars is found in pilgrimage. According to Diana L. Eck the Jain notion of *tirth/tirtha* has a close connection with the words of passage, *tirtha* (ford or crossing) and *tareti* (crosses) in the Vedic and Upanishadic literature. These terms were used in early Jain literature to express profound spiritual transition. Although the earliest Jain literature refers. So the enlightened teacher as a *jina*, “a victor” before long he became known as *tirthankara*, a “ford maker”, who has crossed the stream and reached the far shore (Eck 1981 : 333).

Jains divide their *tirthas* (sacred pilgrimage sites) into two categories: (i) *Siddhakshetras* from where the ascetics realised their liberation and (ii) *atisavgakshetras* which are sacred for other reasons, including *murtis* which bestow favours on their devotees (Sangave, 1980). Interestingly, the Jains economic success is attributed by many to the magical power of their *sadhus* and sacred statutes. There are many sectarian differences among the Jains. **The idea and practice of pilgrimage is, however, one of the important features common to all Jains.** Common pilgrimage sites, despite sectarian claims for ownership, reveal the shared symbol of Tirthankar (founding exemplar of Jainism) in which all repose faith (Singhi, 1991 : 140). Mass pilgrimages held to celebrate sacred anniversaries reveal the reality of community in the life of Jains divided into so many sects and subsects. Virtually all Jains take part in these at some point in their lives. Some people spend a remarkable amount of time trundling in trains, or buses, or even walking as a penance or to acquire merit, to distant holy sites. At these places there can be an immense convergence or assembly of Jains.

30.3.6 Sikh Pilgrimage

Earlier, the founder of Sikh religion had said: "Religion does not consist in wandering to tombs or cremation grounds, nor of sitting in meditative postures" [quoted by Bharati (1963); see Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion* (Oxford, 1909)]. Guru Amar Das, one of the ten preceptors of Sikhism, tried to prevent the Sikhs from visiting Hardwar, Banaras, Allahabad, etc. "However, Sikhs — especially women — frequent the Hindu pilgrim centres, particularly Hardwar, which is close to the Punjab" (Bharati, 1963 : 143). It is thus interesting to note how Sikhism which developed into a distinct religion with belief in the ten Gurus, and reverence for the Holy Book *Guru Granth Sahib*, as also for certain symbols and shrines and initial opposition to pilgrimage came to incorporate pilgrimage. Bharati (*ibid*) informs that Guru Nanak himself visited the tomb of a Muslim saint (Shaikh Farid of Ajodhan).

Guru Nanak visited the Hindu places of pilgrimage like Hardwar, Kurukshetra, Puri, Rameswaram, Varanasi, Kailash, etc. as much as the places sacred to the Muslims but only to attack the hollow rituals, the superstitions, and the exclusiveness of both. Gopal Singh (1970) quotes from M.A. Macauliffe's *Sikh Religion* which records the opposition of Sikh religion to idolatry and "pilgrimages to the sacred rivers and tanks". But the same Sikh writer writes in another place that in the historic *Gurudwaras*, as at Amritsar, a large number of trained musicians are kept in employment to treat the pilgrims to devotional music at almost any time of day or night" (Singh 1970 : 84).

***Gurudwara* (the *Guru's* door) has a pivotal role in the life of the Sikhs whether in villages or towns. There are in India today four famous *Gurudwaras* — at Amritsar, Patna (the birthplace of Guru Govind Singh), Nanded (where he died) and Anandpur. The Golden Temple at Amritsar is the holiest and attracts an unending stream of pilgrims round the year. Amritsar was earlier known as *Guru ka chak* or Ramdaspur, named after Guru Ram Das who founded here a rallying point for the Sikhs. Guru Arjan Singh, known to have infused vigour into Sikhism, increased the importance of Amritsar by making it his headquarters, completing the construction of the tank, and building a temple — *Har mandir* (Temple of God — in its midst). He also built a temple at Tarn Taran and founded the city of Kartarpur, both of which became important places of pilgrimage. The shrine at Dera Baba Nanak is another famous centre in Punjab. Delhi has two famous shrines — *Gurudwara Sis Ganj* (the place of Martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur) and *Gurudwara Rakabganj* (where his dead body was cremated).**

30.3.7 Pilgrimage in Islam

The annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca, in West-Central Arabia, is known by the term *hajj*. The term *hajj* itself, like its Hebrew cognate *hag*, seems to reflect an ancient semitic notion of "going around" or "standing" in the presence of a deity, or sacred mountain or shrine, or the journey to it. Muhammad incorporated the pre-Islamic rite of pilgrimage of early Arabia to Kabah as one of the five Pillars of Faith in Islam, the other four being the profession of faith in Allah and his apostle, prayer or performance of divine worship five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan (*Saum*), compulsory alms giving (*Zakat*). In 1982 from an estimated world Islamic population of 750 million, approximately 3 million Muslims were reported to have made the journey. **The *hajj* experience is an important expression of social and religious unity and equality in Islamic culture. The duty of performing the *hajj* rests on the authority of scripture (the Quran) and the recorded practice of the prophet Muhammad (*sunah*).**

Although *hajj* is a duty which a Muslim man or woman owes to Allah, the decision as to whether and when one should undertake the "journey to the house" belongs

ultimately to each individual Muslim. This element of individual decision makes room for voluntariness in *hajj-hajj* becomes in a way a voluntary act. Hajj is valid at any stage of adult life.

Activity 1

Read Sections 30.3 to 30.3.8 on pilgrimages in different religions. Write a two page note on the similarities and differences that you find. Compare and discuss your findings with other students at the Study Centre.

The *Hajj* proper or the *Great Pilgrimage* begins on the eight of Dhu-al-Hijjah, the day of setting out for Arafat, some thirteen miles east of Mecca. At Arafat the rite of *wukuf* or "standing" at the Mount of Mercy, the themes of brotherhood and repentance dominate the afternoon sermons and supplications. At sundown the rite of *ifadah* ("pouring fourth") or *nafarah* ("stampede") or "hurrying" to Muzdalifah begins. During the overnight or shorter halt at Muzdalifah, pilgrims gather small stones for ritual lapidations or the ceremonial stoning of devil at Mina the next day. The tenth of Dhu al-Hijjah is the final official day of the *Hajj* season. Most of the ritual activities of this day take place in Mina and include (i) the casting of seven small stones at the pillar of Aqaba, symbolizing the stoning of the devil who waked Ibrahim not to obey the command of Allah, (ii) the feast of major sacrifice (*Id al-adha*), (iii) the rite of deconsecration from the condition of *ihram*, and (iv) the visit to Mecca for the *tawaf*, called *al-ifadah* (P.D.: 1966).

Those who complete the *hajj* will be entitled to the epithet *hajj* or *hajji* (*hajjah* or *hajjiyah* if female). This honorific title indicates socially perceived status enhancement. It is a recognition by one's peers that a sacred duty has been performed. It is a matter of universal value and spiritual merit, if not universal spiritual achievement in Islam.

30.3.8 Christian Pilgrimage

Pilgrimages played a very important role in the religious life of the Christian church, particularly in the middle ages, and it is still in vogue among the Christians different places like Palestine. Pilgrimage, or making one's way to holy places, is regarded by devout Christians as an ascetic practice that lets the Christian find salvation through the difficulties and dangers of temporary exile. It is also a means of coming in contact with that which is divine and obtaining grace or the blessings of the supernatural power associated with the pilgrimage site. Pilgrimage is undertaken by Christians also to give thanks to the supernatural power for obtaining the blessing requested.

Pilgrimages to Christian shrines in India have two noteworthy features. First, the most popular shrines attract pilgrims round the year not only from among the Christians but also from among "Indians of other faiths as well" (Moore 1964 : 47). "Even Muslims have been known to overcome their aversion to graven images and to pray at the shrines of Mary" (*idem*). Secondly, norms associated with most of these Christian pilgrimages reflect a significant impact of Hinduism on them. For example, a Christian pilgrim suffering from an ailment in any part of the body offers a wax replica of the affected organ to St. Mary at Bandra. It resembles the practice of offering silver or other metallic replicas of eye, nose, ear, hand or foot to Lord Venkateswara at Tirupati by the Hindu devotees for the cure of ailment of particular organs. The walking pilgrimage of the Christians from Howrah to Bandel (in preference to the very convenient travel by train) to visit 'Our Lady of Happy Voyage' reminds one of similar pilgrimages by the Hindus to many places like Tarakeswar (West Bengal) or Baidayanath Dham (Bihar), where they carry water from a sacred river, walking all the distance on foot. To collect money from aims to visit a place of pilgrimage and *Bhakhaoti* (sacred vow for a wish fulfilment) as

found among the Christian pilgrims to the shrines of Virgin Mary at Bettiah and the village of Rampur in North Bihar or elsewhere are also Hindu attributes. **The pilgrimage by two Christianity in early fifties to Kedarnath and Gangotri as an instance of indigenization of Christianity in India and an attempt to understand Christianity with the use of Hindu idioms and vice-versa.**

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Enumerate the types of pilgrimage that have been described by Turner. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- ii) Write a brief note on pilgrimages in India. Use about 5 to 7 lines for your answer.

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30.4 THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PILGRIMAGES

For a comprehensive understanding of the social significance of pilgrimages we shall first examine Turner's thesis on pilgrimage as a social process, where he emphasizes the *communitas* in pilgrimages and their *liminal* (see Key words) character. We shall then see how pilgrimage is related to different aspects of social life, namely, social and cultural integration, educational, economic, political and other kinds of activities.

30.4.1 Turner's Thesis

Victor W. Turner begins his thesis on pilgrimages as social processes with the idea that pilgrimage has the classic three-stage form of a rite of passage (as described by Van Gennep)

- i) separation,
- ii) the liminal stage (the journey itself, the sojourn at the shrine, and the contact with the sacred, and
- iii) reaggregation (the home-coming).

In this context Turner asks us to consider two modalities of social experience

- i) of structure and
- ii) of *communitas*.

Activity 2

Have you ever been on a pilgrimage or do you know someone who has been on a pilgrimage? Do his/her experiences conform to Turner's classic three stage form of a rite of passage? Try to put the experiences into the three stage frame provided by Turner. Put these experiences down on a sheet of paper and discuss them with your fellow students, if possible at your Study Centre.

In structure people are differentiated by social role and position and linked in an often hierarchical political system. By contrast, *communitas* presents itself in an undifferentiated community of equals who may recognize each other in an immediate and total way. *Communitas* "is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy', possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency". Turner (1974a : 203) remarks that *communitas* emerges where social structure is not and reaffirms the bonds of essential unity upon which the social order ultimately rests.

Pilgrimages seem to be regarded by self-conscious pilgrims both (i) as occasions on which *communitas* is experienced and (ii) journeys towards a sacred source of *communitas*, which is also seen as a source of healing and renewal.

The intervening period and flow of activities between departure from home for the pilgrimage centre and return therefrom to the familiar world is marked out by "liminality, the optimal setting of *communitas* relations, and *communitas*, a spontaneously generated relationship between levelled and equal, total and individuated human beings" (Turner, 1974a : 202).

Liminality and *communitas* together constitute anti-structure. Anti-structure is not the total reversal of structure but rather *the source and origin of the all structures and their critique*. It suggests new possibilities. In the pilgrimage situation the ethos of *communitas* becomes manifest in the social bond which develops among pilgrims and which welds them into a group. Relations among members of the group of pilgrims cut across the social divisions which are typical of social order in the home sphere. Pilgrims are relieved for a time from the nets of social structure wherefrom they journey to the pilgrimage centre. Since it allows temporary release, pilgrimage is designated as a form of anti-structure compared to the highly ordered and structured sedentary life of the place of residence. Pilgrimage involves the establishment of a temporary bond of camaraderie/comradeship and quasi-fraternity among those en route.

30.4.2 Pilgrimage and Socio-cultural Integration

The contribution of pilgrimages to social and cultural integration of a people is observed at three levels.

- i) First, pilgrimage promotes national or regional integration cutting across group boundaries.
- ii) Pilgrimage has a great impact on the group of participants themselves in maintaining and strengthening the values and ideals held by the group.
- iii) Pilgrimage serves in many cases to reinforce the existing patterns of social relations within the area from which the pilgrimage draws pilgrims.

India is well known for diversities of race, region, language, sect, caste etc. Here too pilgrimages have been a very important vehicle of the idea of essential unity of

the Indian people. Noting this M.N. Srinivas (1962 : 105) writes, “The concept of unity of India is essentially a religious one”. Famous centres of pilgrimage lie in every part of the country. Even in pre-British times when the means of communication and transport were very poor, pilgrims occasionally walked hundreds of miles across territories infested with fierce animals and dacoits and braved disease and privation to reach the sacred places for earning religious merit. The grand pilgrimage was *pradakshina* or clockwise circumambulation of the territory of India.

In a sacred centre like Banaras many kinds of people and many local and regional elements of culture are juxtaposed and ordered in a small place. A Maharashtra priest intending to study the Vedas in Banaras will look for and get a Maharashtra scholar in the city where he will also meet Bengalis and Tamils and rituals bearing the colour of their specific regional cultures. For example, the deity Murukan enshrined in several pilgrimage centres throughout the State of Tamil Nadu, stands as a symbol for Tamil Nadu and its people. Pilgrimage practices are a feature of Tamil regional identity. *Pilgrimage forges a social bond within the local area.* Sectarianism and factionalism are widespread in the regions from which the pilgrims come. But the pilgrimage is non-sectarian and is joined by all segments of the population to perform non-sectarian agricultural rites which concern the entire population of the area.

Some pilgrimages transcend national boundaries and therefore function to bring together communities larger than the nation-state. The Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca links all the separate communities of Muslims into one community of the Faithful centred on Mecca.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) What are Turner’s views on structure and communities ? Use about 5 lines for your answer.

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- ii) Write briefly on the socio-cultural aspect of pilgrimage. Use about 5 lines for your answer.

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30.4.3 Pilgrimage and Education

Pilgrimage has been one of the important sources of education, information and cultural awareness for the pilgrims. The Hindu pilgrimage affords, for instance, an opportunity to countless people living in distant villages to know India as a whole and also her varying manners, life styles and customs. Karve (1962 : 13-29) noted that three characteristics of education were present in the pilgrimage —

- i) the preservation of traditional knowledge,
- ii) its cultivation,
- iii) and its transmission to the next generation.

This education was also many-sided. Besides religion and philosophy, the three arts of music, dancing, and drama were included in it. It also encompassed the living together for some time of the whole array of communities, castes and classes within Indian society.

30.4.4 Pilgrimage and the Arts

Dance and music, architecture, sculpture, and painting receive ample encouragement and transmission through pilgrimage. Many of the temples in Hindu and Jain *tirthas* are commendable for their artistic beauty and admirable design and conception which set examples for other such constructions. *Temples in India may rightly be said to represent both poetry and philosophy in brick and stone, and temple worship was in a way responsible for the great development and subsequent refinement of sculpture and painting, and music and dancing to extraordinary levels of excellence.* It is difficult to find temples of great antiquity in North and West India as these parts of the country were vulnerable to repeated invasions and destruction by the foreigners. In north India's *tirtha* tradition a *tirtha* is created through the deification of the land or territory. Temples are less significant than the sacred territory on which they stand. By contrast, the creation of a *tirtha* by building temples and housing the deity is largely a south Indian tradition. Hence, the large temple complex and the walled sacred territory are the characteristic features of the South.

30.4.5 Pilgrimages, Material Culture and Economy

Pilgrimages have a role in the spread of material culture through the exchange of ideas and goods among the pilgrims along the routes of pilgrimage. The route-pattern of ancient pilgrimages suggests at least two favourable zones or corridors of contact between the North and the South. These corridors seem to have been favoured for the southward expansion of plow agriculture. The areas less suited for plow agriculture remained outside the zones and hence the pale of Hinduism and partly inhabited by tribal peoples. The *Purohits* (popularly known as *Pandas*) at Hardwar also maintain an elaborate system of record keeping on long leaders called *bahis* which contain genealogies of their clients *Yajman*. The *bahis* have been kept for generations and are handed down from father to son or even sold to other *purohits*, given in dowry to a son-in-law, or otherwise exchanged as property. This is so because of their association with the means of livelihood of *Pandas* who depend for their living on the custom provided by pilgrims visiting pilgrimages. *Constant coming and going of pilgrims in a pilgrim place gives impetus to growth of business activities in the area, small and big needs of pilgrims have to be catered and as a result appear a variety of marketing arrangements.* Apart from deity requirements of temporary shelter, food, articles for worship, several forms of entertainment, recreation also appear as a side-business activity. For example, the Pushkar *tirtha* in Rajasthan is famous for both its sacred character and its fair, where brisk business in animal trade is transacted between buyers and sellers from a wide area.

30.4.6 Socio-Political Aspect of Pilgrimage

The close association in a common purpose, namely, the purpose of pilgrimage, of large numbers of people from different tribes, communities and localities affords the

basis for the development of political unity and stability of political authority. Pilgrimages played as vital a role in pan-Hebraism (Hebrew system of religion) as in modern pan-Islamism. Pilgrimages provided in the past the ideological legitimation for empires. Christian pilgrimages can be traced back, to the glorification of the Palestinian and Syrian 'Holy Land' perpetrated by the Emperor Constantine and his ecclesiastical retinue. The crusading spirit of the Christian intending to visit Jerusalem was generated when the hardship in the way increased because of the seeming intolerance of the aracen rulers. No doubt, notice of political conquest and worldly ambition entered into the Crusades in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries as well as in the practice of pilgrimage. Similarly, the Buddhist and Islamic holy places were generated out of the respective efforts of King Asoka and Muhammed and their priestly functionaries to establish Buddhism and Islam as state religions, respectively.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) How is pilgrimage a source of education, information and cultural awareness ? Answer in about 5-7 lines.

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- ii) What is, in your opinion the link between pilgrimage places and advancement in performative arts ? Answer in about 5-7 lines.

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- iii) Why do markets develop around pilgrim places ? Answer in about 7-10 lines.

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30.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen what pilgrimages are: This includes the definitions of pilgrimages, temple going, merit producing aspects and so on. Also covered were the institutional aspects of pilgrimage and its sacredness. Pilgrimage centres and liminality and auspiciousness in pilgrimage were also examined. We then examined Turner's typology of pilgrimages, the interpretations of *Hajj* and pilgrimages in India. Finally we turned to the social significance of pilgrimages. This included Turner's thesis, cultural integration, the arts and education. It covered economy and the socio-political aspect of pilgrimage we have therefore covered the topic adequately.

30.6 KEY WORDS

- Antistructure** : this is not the reversal of structure, but the source of all structures and their critique.
- Canon** : something that is fixed, a rule or norm. The canon of scripture means that fixed list of books that are determined to belong to sacred scripture.
- Communitas** : in the context of pilgrimage, communitas is a feeling of being one with other pilgrims, experiencing a release from all societal constraints, from class or creed. This lasts while the pilgrim is at the shrine.
- Liminal** : the state of being on the journey of a pilgrimage, visiting the shrine or pilgrimage spot, and returning we may say pilgrimage takes place in a liminal atmosphere, of being 'in between' two places the home and the pilgrimage shrine.
- Merit** : religious practices that have the calculated aim of improving the future spiritual welfare of oneself or others.
- Reaggregation** : this could be also called the homecoming or returning home to where the pilgrimage ends.
- Tirtha Yatra** : this is a Hindu expression of pilgrimage. It literally means undertaking a journey to river-fords.

30.7 FURTHER READING

Agrawal, B.C. 1980. *Cultural Contours of Religion and Economics in a Hindu Universe*. National : New Delhi.

Jha, Makhan (ed.) 1985. *Dimensions of Pilgrimage* Inter-India Publication : New Delhi.

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

Saraswati, Baidyanath. 1975. *Kashi : Myth and Reality of a Classical Cultural Tradition*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study : Simla.

30.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) A pilgrimage is a long-often strenuous journey to an old or sacred place or shrine. It is undertaken for its spiritual merit. This could also lead to satisfaction of one's mundane desires. It is nevertheless essentially a individualistic pursuit for salvation or material wishes.
- ii) According to one view, the Hindu tradition of pilgrimages derives from the Vedic tradition of rituals and sacrifices, and common folk wisdom. In the pilgrimage traditions of India one finds that the Upanishad wisdom and tradition in the entire territory of India. This is why, according to Saraswati, pilgrim places in India have survived through invasions and wars during the past. The pilgrim places accommodate a variety of sacred sites and interests belonging to the different categories of pilgrims.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The types of pilgrimage enumerated by Turner are
 - i) archaic pilgrimage
 - ii) prototypical pilgrimages
 - iii) high-period pilgrimage
 - iv) modern pilgrimage
- ii) India's pilgrimages are both ancient and continuous. the *tirthas* were glorified by the sacred literature. As the offerings made at the sacred places are a source of livelihood for the priests. They extol the sanctity of the *tirtha* they serve. Tirthas are repositories of tradition and propagators of reinterpreted values and beliefs. The government of India is providing all facilities and accommodations possible at these sites. It is also using these places for its programme of family planning or exhibition of agricultural and industrial products.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) In a structure-situation we find that people are differentiated by status and position. This is often manifested in a hierarchical manner. On the other hand 'communitas' dissolves structure and erects bonds of essential unity.
- ii) Pilgrimage causes socio-cultural integration. In Banaras, for example all regions are represented, including Tamils, Maharashtrians, Bengalis and Punjabis. Many social bonds are formed, indeed some of the transcending national boundaries.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) While on a pilgrimage, people get the chance to interact with persons from different regions, with different socio-economic backgrounds. This interaction gives them a chance to learn about people of other regions, their life styles and customs.
- ii) In most pilgrim places, there are often side-shows which give ample scope for proliferation of performative arts of drama, dance, singing and playing of instruments. Many temples are famous for their devadasis and their performances. Besides, many temples are unique examples of architectural designs and they have beautiful paintings and sculptures.

- iii) Basically, markets appear in pilgrim places to cater for the needs of pilgrims. Pilgrimages involve fulfilment of the daily needs of pilgrims on their way. Apart from daily needs, supply goods related to worship and other sacred duties is also another reason for setting up shops. In addition, for recreation and entertainments, different types of arrangement are made in and around the pilgrim centres.