

UNIT 7 CUSTOMS, RITUALS AND CULTS

Structure

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A Traditional Puja at Talacauvery, Kerala

7.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will discuss some important aspects of Indian society: Customs, rituals, cults and sects in India. After going through this unit you would know about:

- significance of rituals and customs in Indian society
- the main rituals and customs followed among the various religious groups and communities in India
- important cults and sects in India

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In Units 5 and 6 of this Block on society we discussed the structure of Indian society. Continuing our discussion in this Unit we will discuss some other features of Indian society. Here we have included social and religious customs, rituals, cults and sects.

To begin with we will try to define customs and rituals. Following this we will throw some light on the nature of rituals and customs. Next we will familiarize you with some rituals and customs practiced in diverse religious groups and communities in India.

From earliest times there have emerged a number of cults and sects in India. We will throw light on some of the important cults and sects. Many of these cults and sects have had religious and social basis. These cults and sects are spread in different regions and religions. We will discuss their origins and growth. It would not be possible for us to include all the sects and cults. We will therefore confine our discussion to a few important ones. Let us begin with customs and rituals.

7.2 CUSTOMS AND RITUALS

Customs and rituals are important components of all religious beliefs. Sociologists and Anthropologists have defined them from various viewpoints. In this unit we would not go into the detailed technicalities or complexities of defining rituals. We would confine ourselves to a functional definition for the present discussion. There are a number of social and religious practices we observe every day. Are they customs or traditions or rituals? Let

us take a few examples.

- In many communities people are supposed to touch the feet of elders or teachers as a social norm.
- Married women put vermilion in the parting of hair.
- Many people when meet each other shake hands.
- The head of a new born is shaved in many communities.
- In many Hindu communities at the time of marriage the bride and bridegroom are supposed to circumambulate the fire 3, 4, or 7 times.

What do the above acts signify? Are they customs or religious practices or rituals or a mix of these? Do they have any rational basis? Are there some expected specific results of these actions?

You would notice that many of the above listed acts are accepted as traditions and customs. Shaking hands or touching the feet are most of the times instinctive actions. The custom of shaving the head may be a religious practice. But it does not stop only at shaving the head. It is to be done in a prescribed manner which varies from community to community. Similarly putting vermilion may be a symbol of signifying the marital status but doing it in a specified manner signifies more than a custom. When we come to the aspect of shaving the head or putting the vermilion in a specified manner we enter into the realm of ritual practice. Similarly circumambulating the fire at the time of marriage involves more details like whether it would be clockwise or anti clockwise? Bride is to be in front or bridegroom is to be ahead of bride?

You would notice that in the above examples socio-religious practices or customs or rituals have very little differentiation. Many a time it is the learned observer who defines them. Many a time they are used interchangeably. Now coming back to the definition, Edmund Leach, a renowned anthropologist suggests that the words rite (ritual), ceremony and custom "are used interchangeably to denote any non-instinctive predictable action or series of actions that cannot be justified by a 'rational' means-to-ends type of explanation. In this sense the English custom of shaking hands is a ritual, but the act of planting potatoes with a view to harvest is not. The other trend of usage has been to distinguish the three categories: ritual, ceremony and custom" (*Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* vol. 13, pp520-21). Taking the example from India Leach says that, "a high caste Hindu is required by his religion to engage in elaborate washing procedures to ensure his personal purity and cleanliness", the rationality or otherwise of such actions is a matter of cultural viewpoint". Here according to Leach the experts who distinguish between ritual cleanliness and actual cleanliness are separating two aspects of a single state rather than two separate states.

Some experts define rituals as "stylized repetitive behaviour that is explicitly religious" and ceremony as "merely social even in explicit meaning".

7.2.1 Role and Functions of Rituals, Customs and Ceremonies

In India rituals and customs are closely knit in social and religious life of people. Have you ever thought why people follow or perform all these seemingly complex rituals and customs? Do they serve any useful purpose from the point of utility in day-to-day life? You might have noticed that at times some priest or religious **guru** asks the followers to perform these rituals for some reason or the other. Often people perform them on their own with great enthusiasm. Let us pay some attention to the role and functions of these rituals and customs. There are a whole range of functions. Here we will discuss a few functions considered important by sociologists.

- i) **Socialization:** Rituals, ceremonies, etc. act as a socializing force. They bring the individuals within the defined society and integrates them.
- ii) **Social Control:** They act as instruments of social control. They are linked with worldly rewards and punishments. The priest often controls society by asking followers to perform these for some reason or the other. Many a time members of a particular community or caste are asked to perform these to correct the wrongs (sins) committed or else face excommunication. In such a situation they become a weapon of social control.

- iii) **Merit and Status:** At times they are performed with a view to get social prestige and status. Like performing some sacrifice or conducting yagna etc.
- iv) **Identification:** Certain rituals are performed to have a specific identity. Putting vermilion by married women or circumcision among Muslims or piercing of earlobes in some communities are a few examples.
- v) **Spiritual Advancement:** Performance of customs and rituals is closely linked with people's desire to achieve spiritual satisfaction and advancement. Prayers, pilgrimage, fasting, sacrifices and various forms of worship are followed for this purpose. It applies to all the religions and communities.
- vi) **Systems of Healing or Therapy:** One of the most widespread functions of ceremonies and rituals have been to use these for healing purposes. This takes various forms in different religions, social groups and tribes.

The above list is not exhaustive and merely suggestive. Our purpose here is neither to provide a justification or reject the rituals and customs. We wish to give you only a perspective from the sociologists' or anthropologists' observations. One may argue that many of these are irrational illogical and pushes one into superstitions. As suggested by Leach, if "Non-rationality is made a criterion of ritual, it must be remembered that the judge of what is rational is the observer and not the actor".

The continuance of rituals and their performance have an economic basis also. There are a host of priests & ritual experts in all communities who follow performance of these rituals as their occupation. Similarly, for the performers or individuals following these they have become the very essence of religion and a way of life. One important thing to note here is that customs, rituals and ceremonies are not confined to the realm of religion only. There are a number of customs or rituals which are part of social and secular life.

7.2.2 Types of Rituals and Customs

The rituals and customs can be classified into various categories depending on the criterion we adopt. One way of classifying can be to link them with the functions they are supposed to perform. Another way of classifying may be according to its nature like religious, social, etc. Yet another system of classification can be on the lines of community or religion. We do not intend to enter into technical details of sociological or anthropological studies. Here we would like to give you a broad idea of diverse customs and rituals practiced by people of different faiths and communities in India. Instead of listing them religion-wise we would discuss them in terms of day-to-day life, and special occasions and festivals across the communities and religious groups. In almost all religious groups most of the customs and rituals take place in the following stages of life cycle:

- i) birth
- ii) initiation into religious fold
- iii) marriage
- iv) death

Other occasions are related to success in economic ventures, well being, initiating a work, warding off illness, pilgrimages and festivals.

We will discuss these in two parts:

- i) Rituals & Customs related to life cycle
- ii) Other Customs and Rituals

We will not be providing you all the details of each ritual because there are great variations within religious groups, their communities, castes and even families. We will leave these details for you to find out with your observation.

7.2.3 Customs and Rituals Related to Lifecycle

Almost all the communities or religious groups in India have some customs or rituals assigned to various stages of lifecycle. We will not go into the details of each of these and would provide a brief account of some of these.

Birth and Childhood

Rituals related to birth start as soon as a woman conceives a child. In fact there are a number of them which are observed if conception does not take place for some time. The preference for the male child is widespread. There are a number of rituals to ensure the birth of a male child. There are a number of restrictions on the pregnant women for the items of food to be taken. There are restriction on her movements also. In some communities women are supposed to give birth to first child in her parents house.

When a child is born the mother is considered polluted. In a survey conducted in around 4600 communities it was found that 4189 communities observe post delivery pollution. A ritual bath is required for cleanliness. This is to take place in some cases on the 10th or 30th or 40th day of the birth. The child after birth is given a bath and some familiarity with the faith is introduced. Among Muslims the *azan* (call for prayer) is read into child's ear. Similarly in Syrian Christians the message 'Jesus Christ is Lord' is whispered in child's ear. Among some Hindu communities also some scriptures is read to the child. Among Sikhs also mother is supposed to take the child to Gurudwara as soon as she recovers after delivery. Here the *path* (reading) of *Guru Granth Sahib* is done.

The most widespread ritual practice among Hindus and Muslims is to shave off the head of the new born child. It is called *mundan* (tonsuring) ceremony. Generally it is done under the supervision of a priest. Among Muslims male goats are sacrificed on this occasion (two for male child and one for female). Other important childhood ceremony is *namkarana* (naming the child). Around 3426 communities are reported to have this practice. In most of the cases help of priests and holy scriptures is taken for naming the child. First eating of cereals (*annaprashan*) by the child is also an occasion which is celebrated widely.

Initiation

A new born child is supposed to undergo some rituals and ceremonies before he/she is initiated and adopted into religious or social fold of the community. In most cases such customs are rituals related to religious rites. One important aspect of initiation is that they particularly concentrate on male child. Among high caste Hindus the thread ceremony (wearing of the sacred thread) for boys takes place during childhood (if not in childhood it must take place before marriage). Among Muslims the male child is to undergo circumcision (cutting off of a small foreskin of the male sexual organ). Among devout Sikhs child is given *amrit* (prepared with sugar crystals and water) to taste with elaborate rituals. Among Christians also the baptism in Church takes place.

Initiating a child into learning also constitutes an important ceremony and ritual in large number of communities. In most of the cases this is done by first making the child read the holy scriptures.

In a number of communities puberty rites for girls, piercing of ears and nose (for both male and female child) are widely prevalent customs.

Marriage

Marriage in most of communities is a religious and social affair. Elaborate customs and rituals are associated with it. Beginning with the selection of bride or groom, fixing the date for marriage and performance of marriage all have detailed procedures and rituals. In some communities there are even laid down rules for consummating the marriage. In India the involvement of a priest is almost universal (option of civil marriage in a court is of course available). In many communities the marriage takes place in the place of worship. This also shows the religious sanction. This is most common among Christians, Sikhs, and many other communities.

Among Hindus the rituals are most elaborate. Giving of dowry by the bride's family is customary in a large number of communities in India. However, in some communities the

bride's family charges a price from the bridegroom. It is popularly believed that in India divorce, widow marriage and remarriage of female divorcee are taboos.

A recent survey conducted among 4600 communities shatters this myth. According to this survey divorce is permitted in 3794 communities, widow marriage in 3771 communities and remarriage of a divorcee female in 3474 communities. Polygamy and polyandry are also prevalent among many communities.

In many cases there are specified symbols for married status of a woman. The above referred survey had identified forty one such symbols. Of these, wearing vermilion is most common followed by toe-ring, bangles, tali/mangalsutra, bindi, nose stud etc.

Death and After

The rituals and ceremonies associated with death in most cases depend on the philosophy of life and death in different communities. Hindus believe that after death a person is reborn (in other human or animal form). Muslims, Christians and many others do not believe in rebirth. In almost all the communities it is assumed that at death only the body dies and the soul survives. The concept of life after death is also quite prevalent. Death is also a sad and fearful thing which is to be avoided. Most of rituals and ceremonies associated with death are performed with a view to give peace to the departed soul, a happy life after death (reaching the heaven) and ward off the fear of death.

Observance of pollution on death is almost a universal concept in India. Cleaning and purifying the dead body through elaborate rituals under the supervision of priests is most widespread. Prayer for the peace of the soul of the dead person is also universal. This is always done by a priest or a person well versed in religious practices. Among Hindus a Brahmin performs the prayers. Among Muslims the prayer is called **namaz-i janaza** (prayer for the dead body). Among the Sikhs the birth of **Guru Granth Saheb** takes place. There is a variation in the methods of disposing the dead body. Cremation and burial with detailed rituals are the most common modes. Many communities follow both with detailed laid down religious rules. In large number of Hindu communities the ashes collected after cremations are immersed in the Ganges or other rivers. Among few communities the dead bodies are exposed (**Parsees** place their dead bodies in the tower of silence where flesh is eaten by vultures and the bones are disposed off separately) In many communities food is not cooked in the home on the day of the death or for a few days.

In different communities the rituals continue even after the cremation and burial. Special prayers are organized on the 3rd, 10th, 13th, 40th day or such other days and after a year. In many cases the prayers for the departed soul are organized every year.

7.2.4 Other Customs and Rituals

As already stated besides the life cyclic rituals a number of rituals and customs take place in day-to-day life. We are not analyzing specific rituals and would provide a brief comments categorywise.

One of the occasions for rituals is at the time of initiating any activity like sowing or harvesting of crops, starting construction, starting any business venture, etc. Entering a new house for living (**grahapravesh**) is also very common. Auspicious dates are chosen and prayers accompanied with some rituals are performed.

Most widespread rituals are for warding off illness and for general well being. These are more common in tribal society where modern medicines are not easily available. Most of the people in general follow modern medical treatments but alongwith these the special prayers and rituals are organized. These rituals are performed by special category of people and include priests, **ojhas** (shamans), sorcerers, **tantriks** etc. Another common practice on such occasions is ritual recital of holy scriptures and verses on rosaries or organizing congregation. Ritual animal sacrifice is also common practice in some communities.

Pilgrimages are occasions for indulging in rituals. Almost all communities in India have their pilgrimage centres spread in the country or outside. People visit them round the year or on special days fixed for the purpose. Among Hindus bathing in sacred rivers at specific spots is a common practice. At these places priests supervise the observance of rituals. Jains, Sikhs, Christians and others also have their pilgrimage centres. Muslims go to Mecca for performing

Haj every year. Here, shaving of head, wearing non - stitched cloths, circumambulating the **Kaaba** (in Mecca) are some of specific rituals.

Festivals also have their specific rituals. Fasting, specific prayers to specific gods and goddesses, immersion of idols in rivers, animal sacrifices, ritual mourning and other such activities are main ritualistic components of different festivals cutting across religious groups and communities.

Check Your Progress - 1

1) Briefly comment on the following roles of rituals and customs:

i) Social Control

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ii) Identification

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2) What are the main customs and rituals performed at the time of birth among Hindus.

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3) Discuss some rituals related to marriage in India.

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7.3 CULTS

A cult is often individual based and loosely organised group which is transient in nature. It often possesses a highly fluctuating membership. Many of its members can also be parts of other religious groups.

The cult is often a voluntary organisation with low level of discipline. Its membership is generally open to all. It, however, possesses a doctrine and a set of well-defined rituals in which all members are required to participate. In cases of secretive cults, the membership is extremely restrictive. The cults generally find a fertile ground in the urban centres where the uprooted people from diverse cultural backgrounds find the pace of life too difficult to adjust. The rural areas also throw up various kinds of cultic movements centred around individuals or mythical or legendary personalities. Here we are going to discuss two significant Indians cults of modern times.

Satya Sai Baba

This cult revolves around the personality of Satya Sai Baba. He was born in Andhra Pradesh and considers himself (and is considered by his followers) as the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi in Maharashtra. He is also considered an **Avatar** who combines Shiva and Shakti in one soul. This assertion of divine status is made by himself boldly and repeatedly.

His teachings include non-violence, abstinence from alcohol and smoking and non-vegetarian food. He talks of unity of all religious communities. He considers the modern ideas and culture as inimical to India and focusses on the importance of Indian folk traditions. Social services of various kinds such as feeding the poor, assisting authorities in the relief work, expansion of education, child development etc. are undertaken by this cult.

Satya Sai Baba has a lot of followers and devotees and uses his charisma repeatedly to attract men and women from all over the country. His followers come from both the urban and rural areas and include both Hindus and Muslims. It is largely believed by his followers as well as many others that his charisma and the miracles performed by him are divine attributes.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

Popularly known as **Hare Krishna** cult, this movement is more famous internationally, particularly in the English-speaking countries like United States, Canada and United Kingdom. This society was founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. He went to USA in 1965 to spread his devotional message. He attracted many followers in New York, Los Angeles, Berkeley, Boston and Montreal. Various centres of ISKCON were established in these places with its headquarters at Los Angeles. By now it has established many branches in various parts of the world.

The followers of this cult wear saffron dresses and the men also shave their heads. Chanting of the name of Lord Krishna is an essential ritual and public chantings of **Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna** are performed by the followers of this cult. They basically believe in devotional form of worship and seek salvation through it.

7.4 SECTS

The term sect is used in the sociology of religions to designate a particular kind of a religious group. It can be distinguished from religion in the sense that it is formed within a religion and operates as a protest group. A sect is a voluntary society of strict believers who live apart from the world in some ways. Whereas the membership to a religion is on the basis of birth or baptism, membership of a sect is a voluntary act.

Sects were formed, within particular religious traditions, as a product of the specificity of attitudes towards four major aspects of human civilization. These are:

- family life,
- economic activity,
- politics and power, and
- intellectual endeavours

Different attitudes or positions on any or all of them often lead to the formation of a sect. All the sects represented at the initial stage at least, a defiance of the religious tradition, within which they were located. This defiance or protest was expressed mainly in two ways:

- 1) in a militant and active oppositionist manner, and
- 2) in a passive and withdrawn manner.

Within the Islamic tradition the rise of **Wahabis** represented an active oppositionist sect whereas the **Bahais** were more of a passive and withdrawing kind.

An important characteristic of sects has been their not too infrequent transformation to the status of formal religions. Although starting as an expression of protest against the world, many sects adjusted and got accommodated into the world. This often happened as a result of birth of children in sects (as against voluntary membership at the beginning), better adjustment to conditions of life, increasing prosperity and the passage of time. All of them, put together, created conditions of compatibility between the sects and the world and initiated the process of the sects converting into religious orders.

Sects were originally conceived as cohesive social groups and their cohesion was maintained by a series of measures and rituals which differentiated one sect from the other, like endogamy, restricted participation in social events and certain military services also. Apart from this, peculiar habits of eating and abstinence and peculiarities of dress also helped to set a sect apart from the other.

To sum up, sects were essentially protest groups located within particular religious traditions. They stood for a defiance of the world. This defiance was expressed in militant and passive manner. Sects were based on a voluntary membership of people brought together by a similarity of ideas. If the sects survived beyond the founding generation, they often tended to get transformed into religions, though all the sects did not necessarily become religions. Having learnt about sects in general, it is now time for you to get some information about some of the sects within the main Indian religions.

India has a large number of sects and cults and subsects. These have originated from different religions. It would be difficult for us to give details of all these sects and subsects. Here we will confine our discussion to a few sects and cults of prominent religious groups of India viz. Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity.

7.4.1 Hindu Sects

The biggest number of sects and subsects can be traced to Hinduism. Among Hindus Siva, Vishnu and the Mother Goddess (worshipped as Durga, Kali and many other names) are the most important deities. Origin of most of the cults, sects and subsects can be traced to these three.

Of these the cults of Siva and Parvati can be traced to the earliest period of Indian History, while the cults of Krishna are comparatively later development.

Vaishnava Sects

The list of **Vaishnava** sects is long. These sects worship Vishnu, as Krishna or as Rama. The important sects and subsects are:

- i) Sri Sampradaya (followers of Ramanuja)
- ii) Ramanandis
- iii) Kabir Panthis
- iv) Dadu Panthis
- v) Maluk Dasis
- vi) Raya Dasis
- vii) Vallabhacharya Sampradaya
- viii) Mira Bais
- ix) Madhavacharis
- x) Chaitanya sect

- xi) Charan Dasis
- xii) Sadhna Panthis
- xiii) Radha Vallabhis etc.

The list is very long. Here we have given a few names only. We will give brief comments on few of these.

Sri Sampradaya: The sect was founded by Ramanuja a great scholar of Indian philosophy from South India. The sect is popular in South India. The followers have a strictly regulated life and rules for eating. They wear distinguishing marks on the forehead.

Ramanandis: Founder of this sect was Ramananda. The followers of this sect are spread mainly in the Gangetic plain of North India. The main emphasis of the sect is on devotion to Rama the incarnation of Vishnu. Men of all caste were taken into the sect. Ramanand had a number of disciples many of whom came from lower castes. A number of subsects were developed by the disciples of Ramanand. Kabir and Dadu were two most important whose sects are Kabir panth and Dadu Panth.

Sects of Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya

These two sects were most popular in Western India (Vallabhacharya) and Eastern India (Chaitanya). Vallabhacharya sect was founded by Vallabha a Telugu Brahmin. He taught his disciples not to turn their backs to worldly pleasures. He opposed fasts and self mortification. Their gurus also lead a comfortable life. The followers of Chaitanya were to lead a simple and humble life. They believed in singing devotional songs and dancing as a way of worship.

Shaiva Sects

1) **Dashnami Sampradaya:** In the eighth century Shankracharya gave a new turn to Shaivism. He established a very important cult called Dashnami Sampradaya. Dashnamis are also known as Vedic Saivas. Before the establishment of Dashnami order, Tantrik Shaivas such as Kanphatas, Aghoris, Kalamukhis and Kapaliks dominated the Shaiva cult.

Shankaracharya organized the Dashnami order which includes the following ten categories of Sanyasis: 1) Giri 2) Puri 3) Bharti 4) Vana 5) Parvati 6) Aranya 7) Sagara 8) Tirtha 9) Ashram 10) Saraswati.

Shankaracharya established four seg monastic centres namely, Jyotir Peeth, Shringeri Peeth, Govardhan Peeth and Dwarka or Sharda Peeth in North, South, East and West respectively. For the smooth functioning of the Mathas, area, direction, sampradaya, Dashnami order, deities to be worshipped, pilgrimage, Veda, Mahasakya (great saying), Gotra and jurisdiction of each monastic centre was fixed.

Dashnami sanyasis are divided into two broad sections namely Dandadharis (staff holders) and paramhansas (holding no staff). Out of the ten subsects of Dashnami order, Sanyasis of only three that is, Tirtha, Ashram and Saraswati are allowed to hold staff and the rest called Paramhansas are not allowed to do so.

Dashnami ascetics are graded according to their spiritual attainment into four categories as follows:

- i) **Kutichaka:** He is an ascetic who has renounced the world and lives in a hut engaged in contemplation and worship. He subsists on alms given to him by others.
- ii) **Bahudeeka:** Such ascetics collect alms in kind but never in cash.
- iii) **Hansa:** Such ascetics are well versed in vedanta and pursue the aim of attaining full knowledge of the supreme being.
- iv) **Paramhansa:** Such ascetics represent the stage of heights spiritual evolutions.

Dashnami Sanyasis are further divided into two sections namely, Astradharis (weapon holders) and Shastradharis (scripture holders). Astradharis are fighter ascetics and Shastradharis are learned ascetics. The former Known as Nagar Sanyasis are organised

through various Akharas. The **Dashnami Akharas** were originally centres of military training for the fighter Nagas. Following are the seven **Dashnami Akharas**.

- i) Maha Nirwani Akhara
- ii) Niranjani Akhara
- iii) Juna or Bhairo Akhara
- iv) Atal Akhara
- v) Awahan Akhara
- vi) Anand Akhara
- vii) Nirwani Akhara

2) **Kanphata or Nath Panthi**: This sect forms the part of **Tantrik Shaivism**. **Kanphatas** pierce their ears and insert ear-rings in them. Gorakh Nath is regarded to be the re-organiser of this cult. This cult is believed to have been founded by Sati Nath.

The chief scripture of this cult is "Hath Yoga Pradipika" **Kanphatas** regard Shiva as the supreme reality. Salvation lies in the union with Shiva. In Nath Sampradaya, **Nath yoga** and **Tantra** are recommended as the most appropriate means of salvation.

3) **Aghori Panth**: The sect is also known as **Aghor Panth** or **Augar Panth** and the followers are call **Aghoris** or **Aughars**. This cult was founded by **Bhrama Giri**, a disciple of Gorakhnath. The name of the cult is derived from the word 'Aghor' meaning non-terrifying the epithet **Aghor** is usually used for Shiva. Thus, it is clear that **Aghor Panthi** means an ascetic who worships Shiva. **Aghoris** are found all over India and move about all the year round.

The **Aghori** smears himself with the ashes of the funeral pyre. He wears the frontal mark denoting the unity of the Hindu triad. He also wears a **Rudraksha** rosary and a necklace of stone. Some wear rosary of human teeth too.

4) **Vir Shaiva or Lingayat Sampradaya**: **Lingayats** are mostly found in southern India. The name of this cult has been derived from the word **linga** (Phallus symbol). A true **lingayat** wears on his body a small silver box containing a stone **linga** which is a symbol of his faith and the loss of which means spiritual death. It is worn by both male and female members of the sect.

Of the Hindu sects, **Lingayats** or **Vir Shaivas** acknowledge Shiva whose symbol, the **linga** they wear on their person. They are against caste system. All wearers of the **lingas** are proclaimed equal in the eyes of the God. They prohibit child marriage and stand for widow remarriage. They bury their dead.

The **Lingayat** sect was started in the twelfth century. The most important ceremony of the **Lingayats** is **Ashta Varna** which includes eight rituals called **Guru, Linga, Vibhuti, Rudraksha, Mantra, Jangam, Tirtha** and **Prasad**. **Lingayats** are not permitted to touch meat or liquor. The founder saint of this sect was Basara. There are three sub-sects of **Lingayats**. (1) **Pancham Salis** with full **Ashta Varna** rites (2) **Non-Pancham Salis** with full **Ashta Varna** rites (3) **Non-Pancham Salis** without **Ashta varna** rites. **Lingayats** or **Vir Shaivas** draw slack sectarian mark on their foreheads.

5) **Kapalika Panth**: Though almost dying now this sect was widely prevalent in Ancient India. **Kapaliks** are expert **Tantriks**. They wear some-rosaries and live naked near ghats. They take their food from the human skull. They eat meat and drink wine without hesitation. The deity of **kapaliks** is **Kal Bhairaw**. Though the number of **Kapaliks** is very small, they are spread all over India.

Shakta Sampradaya

In the system of **Shakta yoga** philosophy, **Shakti** (female power) is regarded as the supreme reality. Shiva is **chitta** (conscious) **Shakti** is **Chidroopini** (pure consciousness). **Brahma, Vishnu** and **Shiva** do their work of creation, preservation and destruction respectively in obedience to **Shakti**. **Shakti** is endowed with **Ichcha** (will), **Gyan** (Knowledge), **Kriya** (action). **Shakti** is embodiment of power. She maintains the sportive play or the **leela** of the Lord. She is Universal Mother. She is manifested in the form of **Durga, Kali, Bhagvati, Chamundi, Tripura, Sundari, Rajrajeshwari, Parvati, Sita, Radha** and so on. **Shakti** is pure

blissful consciousness. Shakti is full of three **gunas** (qualities namely) **Satya, Rajas** and **Tamas**. He who worships such a shakti or Divine Mother is called Shakta. Worship of shakti is one of the oldest and most widely spread practice of Hinduism. The **Vedas** form the philosophical background of Shaktism.

Shaktism is not merely a philosophy or theory. It prescribes systematic yoga to the devotees. It helps the aspirants to rouse the **Kundalini** (mystic serpent power) and unite it with Lord Shiva and enjoy the supreme bliss.

The **Shaktas** are divided into three groups which are as follows:

- 1) **Dakshnachari** : They are completely free from sensuality and do not offer blood sacrifice to their deities.
- 2) **Bamachari**: They follow the Teachings of **Tantrikas** and freely offer blood sacrifices to their deities.
- 3) **Kaulik**: They follow Kaul Upanishad. Their object of veneration is the great power of Nature which they call 'Jagdamba' (the mother of the world.)

Ganpatya Sampradaya: The followers of this sect consider Ganesh as the first cause of the Universe. According to **Ganpatyas**, **Ganpati** is the god who exists eternally and through whose **Maya, Brahma** and other divine principles are created. There are six sub-sects of Ganpati Sampradaya.

These differ mainly in the form or title under which the god Ganesh is adored.

7.4.2 Muslim Sects

The Muslims are divided into a large number of sects and subsects. In India the **Sunnis**, the **Shias**, the **Bohras**, the **Ahmediyas** are a few bigger sects. Within these sects there are sub sects. The **Wahabis** are considered subsect of **Sunnis**. Ismaili Bohras of the **Bohra** sect. Many of these started as cults around some individuals but in due course they developed into sects. We will give brief account of Sunnis and Shias' the two main sects spread throughout the world.

Sunnis claim to be the followers of the **Sunna** (the tradition of prophet). They mainly follow four major schools of Islamic thought put forward by great scholars - Abu Hanifa, Malik Abu Anas, Ash-Shafi and Ahmed Ibu Hamfal. The **Sunnis** also consider the succession of Caliphs Hazrat Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman and Ali as proper and just. They do not recognize any spiritual leader or Imam other than prophet. They mainly depend on **Quran** and the **Hadith** (sayings or actions of the prophet) for their beliefs. **Shias** differ from **Sunnis** on the question of succession after the prophet. **Shias** consider that Hazrat Ali should have succeeded the prophet as his only heir. The **Shias** also believe in the tradition of **Imams** as religious and spiritual leader after the prophet. Beginning with Ali as the first **imam** the **Shias** believe in a series of 128 **imams** (the twelfth is yet to come). Apart from this basic difference a number of matters of interpretation also crept in and **Shiaism** developed as a major sect within Islam.

7.4.3 Sikh Sects

The rise of sects in Sikhism was more in the form of religious reform and movements. Many of these sects had both Sikhs and Hindus as members. The **Nirankaris**, **Radha Soamis** of Beas and the **Namdharis** are some prominent sects.

The **Nirankari** sect was started by Dyal Das, a merchant of Peshawar. He opposed idol worship and disapproved of going on pilgrimages and performing Brahminical rituals. He saw the God as formless - **nirankar**. To begin with his followers came from Khatri, Arora and Bania castes. In due course they acquired the system of **Gurus** and developed their own places of worship. They recognized many gurus other than ten Sikh **Gurus**.

Radha Soami sect was founded by Shiv Dayal a Hindu banker of Agra. He included doctrines of both Hinduism and Sikhism. The main difference with Sikhism is that they believe in a living **guru**. The sect was divided into a number of sub sects like **Radha Soamis** of Dayal Bagh (Agra) and of Beas (Punjab). They also have separate religious places. Their discourse continues to draw heavily from the **Adi Granth** of Sikhs.

Namdhari sect was founded by Balak Singh of village Hazro in North West Frontier region. They developed different forms of worship, and dress code. The followers of the sect chanted hymns and worked themselves into a state of frenzy and emitted loud shrieks (Kuks) and therefore came to be known as **Kukas**.

7.4.4 Buddhist Sects

After the Gautam Budha several Buddhist councils were held to debate the questions of faith and religious order. These gave rise to two main schools of thought. Later on a third one also emerged. These are **Hinayana**, **Mahayana** and the **Vajrayana**.

The followers of Hinayana believe in the original traditions of Budha. They recognized only a fixed body of canonical literature. Their main literature was limited to **tripitaka** (three baskets). There are **Vinay Pitaka**, **Sutta Pitaka** and **Abhidhamma Pitaka**.

The **Mahayana** claimed their own doctrines and practices as belonging to **Bodhisatva** (enlightened being). They called themselves **Mahayana**. **Bodhisatva** according to them was potential **Budha** and everybody could achieve it. They believed that accumulated merit of **bodhisatva** could be transferred to help those who wanted to achieve salvation. The **Hinayana** do not accept deity worship while the **Mahayana** introduced the idea of deity worship.

The **Tantrayana** or **Vajrayana** sect incorporates mystic and magical dimension. They believed that salvation can be achieved by acquiring magical powers called **Vajra** (thunderbolt)

7.4.5 Jain Sects

After Mahavira there emerged differences among his followers over many religious questions. As a result two main sects - the **Digambara** (sky clad) and **Swetambara** (white clad) emerged. The **Digambara** believed that the monks should not wear cloth, while **Swetambara** believed in wearing white cloth. The **Digambara** also believed that the women cannot attain salvation. A number of subsects also emerged in due course. Many of these rejected the practice of image worship of the **Jina** or Mahavira.

7.4.6 Christian Sects

Christians also have a number of denominations and sects. However, a major divisions came in the 16th century during the reformation movement in Europe. A section of the community felt that the Church and society are in a state of crisis. They demanded reforms in such a situation and came to be called as Protestants. They organized themselves under a separate Church. The Protestant Churches recognize the authority of Bible alone, whereas the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches also recognize their church tradition as authoritative besides the Bible. In India most of the Christian sect and subsects exist under the two major denominations the Catholics and the Protestants.

Check Your Progress - 2

1) What do you understand by sects?

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2) Comment on following Vaishnava and Shaiva sects:

i) **Ramanandis**

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ii) **Chaitanya sect**

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iii) **Lingayats**

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3) Briefly describe the following:

i) **Sikh sects**

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ii) **Buddhist sects**

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7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed the traditions, customs and rituals in Indian society. You must have observed that the customs and rituals are part of everyday life in India. There is a large variation in the observance of these customs and rituals in different religious groups, communities and regions. In many cases even in divided families, they have their own set of customs and rituals. Most of the rituals take place at different points in one's life cycle, seasons, festivals etc. There are even similarities in rituals across the religions.

The role and functions of rituals as also the types of rituals were also discussed.

Cults and Sects also came under discussion. Cults many a times develop into sects. In this Unit, more attention has been paid to sects. The important sects of all the major religions have been listed with brief notes. It was not possible to give an exhaustive list of all the sects, this list, therefore, be treated as suggestive only.

7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress - 1

- 1) See Sub-sec. 7.2.1.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 7.2.3.
- 3) See Sub-sec. 7.2.3.

Check Your Progress - 2

- 1) See Sec. 7.4.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 7.4.1.
- 3) See Sub-secs. 7.4.3 and 7.4.4.