UNIT 3 PILGRIMAGE CENTRES

Structure

3.1 Pilgrimage
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3.3 Self Assessed Questions
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3.1 PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage to sacred places forms an important item of the spiritual discipline of the people of almost all religions in the world. Certain places are considered holy due to some mythological, puranic or religious belief attached to it. Thus, the devoted Buddhist goes to Bodh-Gaya, the Christian to Jerusalem, the Hindu to Varanasi and Rameshvaram, a Jaina to Palithana and Shravanabelagola, a Sikh to Amrutsar, Muslims to Mekka, Madina etc. These places deepen his feeling for spirituality and redirect him to understand God.

1. In some religions pilgrimage has been followed as ritual tradition too. The follower of the faith has to make it a point to visit the respective pilgrimage centre at least once in life time. Many people take the journey as many times as possible.

2. A visit to holy places gives a fresh stimulus especially as it brings them into contact with many devout minds and helps to awaken a sympathetic response to them.

3. Some pilgrimage centres have developed as seats of learning, like Varanasi, Kanchipuram etc.

4. It provides economic opportunities to develop all facilities for the people who visit the holy places. Commercial activities grown in such places.

5. Architecture, sculpture and painting received ample encouragement from pilgrimage. Many artisans make their living as artisans also.

6. One of the greatest services the institution of pilgrimage has rendered to India as a whole is bringing unity among people.

3.2 PILGRIMAGE

The Hindus have a large number of holy places from the Himalayas in the north to Kanya kumari in the south. Of all the places the Himalayan region has been considered most suitable for spiritual practices through the ages. There is a temple in Badrinath, another at Kedarnath, a cave at Amarnath. Inspired by the Himalayas, the abode of Shiva, many people from time immemorial have been going to the caves and forest-retreats to solve the mystery of life. Another important place is the river Ganga. Countless saints and sages have meditated and on the river’s shores. Therefore it is considered very holy in the eyes of the Hindus. There are innumerable places of pilgrimage on her banks.
In ancient India the ‘asramas’ of great rishis was visited by people. They could seek the guidance of the learned sage who lived in it. With the passage of time these also became pilgrimage places. Similarly the places associated with Rama and Krishna is also considered holy.

Great temples were built by the kings of many dynasties. Every place where a big sanctuary was built and worship was performed with wonderful ceremonies began to attract crowds of people. This became a place of pilgrimage to later generations.

Even in the Vedic age there was a conscious attempt to keep the people united through the bond of common culture. There are songs that celebrated the great rives and mountain which are considered holy. The songs are sung in the name of Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. The Mahabharata names seven mountains which are held sacred viz. Raivatka, Vindhya, Sahya, Kumara, Malaya, Sri-parvata, and Pariyat. Similarly there are seven sacred places viz. Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya(Varanasi), Kasi( Banaras), Kanchi, Avantika (Ujjain) and Dvaravati (Dwaraka). These are believed to possess the power to grant salvation to one who visits them. The other pilgrimage centres for Sri Krishna worship being Brindavan, Mathura, Dwaraka, Nathadvara, and Udupi. The pilgrimage centres for the worshippers of Mahavishnu are Badarinath, Tirupati, Srirangam, Melukote, etc.

In addition, there are twelve ‘jyotirlingas’ and fifty-one Sakti-pithas located in different parts of the country. A great service of uniting the Hindus in a common religious and cultural consciousness was done by Sankaracharya. He established four sacred mutts - Sringeri in the south, Badrinath in the north, Dwaraka in the west and Puri in the east. Similarly four lakes viz. Bindu, Pampa, Narayana and Manasa are considered sacred.

From time to time a great interest in pilgrimages was awakened by the life of great saints and prophets. Thus Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Caitanya and other spiritual giants influenced people towards a religious attitude of life.

Kashi and Prayag: They are the holiest places for Hindus. Situated on the banks of Ganga these places when visited wipes of sin and allows the minds of the followers to seek the path for salvation.

Rameshwaram: One of the most sacred towns of India, is well known for its temple corridor - the longest in India, the Bathing Ghat, Gandhamadhana Parvatham, Kodhandaramar temple, Kurusadai and other nearby islands - abundant with coral reefs and other marine wonders.

Rameswaram is hallowed by the epic Ramayana. A devout Hindu who visits Varanasi is expected to visit the Rameswaram also for the culmination of his quest for salvation. Rama sanctified this place by worshipping Lord Siva after the war against Ravana. Therefore, it is held sacred by Saivites and Vaishnavites as well.

Puri: One of the four celebrated religious centres of India, Puri, and the abode of Lord Jagannath needs no introduction. According to tradition Puri was once a thickly wooded hill inhabited by the Sabaras (Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian tribes of the Austric linguistic family). The Jagannath Rathyatra conducted once a year is the world famous festival. During this festival the original Gods come out of the Sanctum and they are placed on the chariots. The three chariots dedicated to Balabhadra, (the elder brother of Sri Krishna), Subhadra, (the younger sister of Balabhadra and Krishna) and Sri Krishna are drawn at a time. The chariots are
built every year afresh and decorated tastefully. The Chariot festival draws a crowd of nearly 10 lakhs every year. Puri is also visited by the Advaitins. One of the four mathas of Shankaracharya was established here.

**Bodhgaya** is one of the most important and sacred Buddhist pilgrimage centers of the world. It was here under a banyan tree, the Bodhi Tree, Gautama attained supreme knowledge to become Buddha, the Enlightened One. Significantly, the state’s name of ‘Bihar’ originated from ‘Vihara’ meaning monasteries which abounded in Bihar. There is a magnificent Mahabodhi temple and the Tree from the original sapling still stands in the temple premises. The temple is an architectural amalgamation of many centuries, cultures and heritages. While its architecture is of the Gupta era, it has later ages inscriptions describing visits of pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Myanmar and China between 7th and 10th century AD. It is perhaps still the same temple Hieuen Tsang visited in 7th century. We have other Buddhist pilgrimage centres such as Sanchi, Sarnath, Lumbini, Kushinagar, Khatmandu, Dharmasala etc.

**Jain Pilgrimage Centres**: The Jain pilgrimage centres are concentrated mainly in Rajasthan, Gujrat and Karnataka. The Jains consider a holy duty to attend the mahamastakabhisheka, the ritual bath offered to colossal image of Bahubali at Shravanabelagola once in 12 years. Other important places are Moodabidre, Karkala in Karnataka. In Rajasthan the Dilwara Temple at Mt. Abu is considered as jewel in stone. It is a holy place and also an outstanding architectural delight. Another holy place for Jains is the large number of temples dedicated to all the 24 tirthankaras, situated at Ranakpur Rajasthan. The most outstanding Jaina centre for the Jaina practices and rituals is Palithana in Rajasthan. A devout Jaina tries to visit all these pilgrimage centres by walking the distance in bare foot.

**Other Pilgrimage Centres**: For Muslims Mecca and Madina are the holiest places on the earth. The pilgrimage to these places is known as ‘haj’. The devout Muslims would like to visit these places at least once in their life time. Hence in India some of the Dargah are considered as holy places. When the annual fairs and festivals are held in Dargah the Muslims attend and take part in holy deliberations. To name a few Salim Chisti at Fathepur Sikri, Dargah of a holy man near Srirangapattanam, Sherif Dargah at Gulburga, and such others.

Similarly the holy places for Christians are Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Vatican church Rome. Since it is difficult to travel to these places the Christians treat their churches built in cities and small towns as their pilgrimage centres. To name a few, St. Aloysius Church Mangalore, St. Xavier Church in Goa, Velankani in Tamilnadu, St. Philomena at Mysore, Mother Teresa church at Calcutta and such others.

The holy place for Sikhs is known as Gurudvara. Every important town where the Sikh community in large numbers will have gurudvaras where they conduct religious activities. Among them the most famous being the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

### 3.3 SELFASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

**Self Assessment Questions 1**

a) seats of learning, b) pilgrimage centre, c) fresh stimulus, d) bringing unity among people. e) who visit the holy places.

Complete the following with right answers:

1. The follower of the faith has to make it a point to visit the respective—
2. A visit to holy places gives a ________________
3. Some pilgrimage centres have developed as ________________
4. It provides economic opportunities to develop all felicities for the people ________________
5. One of the greatest services the institution of pilgrimage has rendered to India as a whole is ________________

Self Assessment Question 2

State whether true or False:

1. There are two ‘jyotirlingas’ and fifty-nine Sakti-pithas located in different parts of India.
2. There are no pilgrimage centres on the banks of Ganga.
3. A devout Hindu who visits Varanasi is expected to visit the Rameswaram also for the culmination of his quest for salvation.
4. According to tradition Puri was once a thickly wooded hill inhabited by the Bhilavas and Gounds.
5. The Jains consider a holy duty to attend the mahamastakabhisheka, the ritual bath offered to colossal image of Bahubali at Shravanabelagola once in 12 years.

3.4 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you mean by pilgrimage?
2. Give the list of major pilgrimage centres in India.
3. Write a note on A) Rameshvaram B) Bodh Gaya 3) Jain Pilgrimage centres 4) Sikh pilgrimage

3.5 ANSWERS

Self Assessment Questions 1

1 - b), 2 - c), 3 - a), 4 - e) 5 - d)

Self Assessment Questions 2

1 - F, 2 - F, 3 - T, 4 - F, 5 - T

Terminal Questions

1. Pilgrimage to sacred places forms an important item of the spiritual discipline of the people of almost all religions in the world. Certain places are considered holy due to some mythological, puranic or religious belief attached to it. Thus, the devoted Buddhist goes to Bodh-Gaya, the Christian to Jerusalem, the Hindu to Varanasi and Rameshvaram, a Jaina to Palithana and Shravanabelagola, a Sikh to Amritsar, Muslims to Mekka, Madina etc. These places deepen his feeling for spirituality and redirect him to understand God.
2. The major pilgrimage centres in India are: Bodh Gaya, Sanchi, Sarnath, Amrutsar, Goa, Fatehpur Sikri, Mangalore, Puri, Kashi, Prayag, Rameshwaram, Sravanabelagola, Palithana, Mt. Abu, Badarinath etc.

3. a) **Write note on: Rameshwaram:** One of the most sacred towns of India, it is well known for its temple corridor - the longest in India, the Bathing Ghat, Gandhamadhana Parvatham, Kodhandaramar temple, Kurusudai and other nearby islands - abundant with coral reefs and other marine wonders.

Rameswaram is hallowed by the epic Ramayana. A devout Hindu who visits Varanasi is expected to visit the Rameswaram also for the culmination of his quest for salvation. Rama sanctified this place by worshipping Lord Siva after the war against Ravana. Therefore, it is held sacred by Saivites and Vaishnavites as well.

b) **Bodhgaya** is one of the most important and sacred Buddhist pilgrimage centers of the world. It was here under a banyan tree, the Bodhi Tree; Gautama attained supreme knowledge to become Buddha, the Enlightened One. Significantly, the state’s name of ‘Bihar’ originated from ‘Vihara’ meaning monasteries which abounded in Bihar. There is a magnificent Mahabodhi temple and the Tree from the original sapling still stands in the temple premises. The temple is an architectural amalgamation of many centuries, cultures and heritages. While its architecture is of the Gupta era, it has later ages inscriptions describing visits of pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Myanmar and China between 7th and 10th century AD. It is perhaps still the same temple Hieuen Tsang visited in 7th century.

c) **Jain Pilgrimage Centres:** The Jain pilgrimage centres are concentrated mainly in Rajasthan, Gujrat and Karnataka. The Jains consider a holy duty to attend the *mahamastakabhisheka*, the ritual bath offered to colossal image of Bahubali at Shravanabelagola once in 12 years. Other important places are Moodabidre, Karkala in Karnataka. In Gujrat the Dilwara Temple at Mt. Abu is considered as jewel in stone. It is a holy place and also an outstanding architectural delight. Another holy place for Jains is the large number of temples dedicated to all the 24 tirthankaras, situated at Ranakpur Rajasthan. The most outstanding Jaina centre for the jaina practices and rituals is Palithana in Rajasthan. A devout Jaina tries to visit all these pilgrimage centres by walking the distance in bare foot.

d) **The holy place for Sikhs** is known as *Gurudvara*. Every important town where the Sikh community in large numbers will have *gurudvaras* where they conduct religious activities. Among them the most famous being the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

Conjecture: Through this paper we have understood the cultural heritage of India in its true sense. We have learnt how India is the land of multiple cultures, how the people live in religious harmony, in spite of several invasions and the infusion of new cultures India allowed every culture to flourish in time and space. Because of this nature, we have the plurality in our thought and practice which is not in contrast but in cooperation. Study of all these units made us to feel great about our land, our people and our cultural heritage.