

RELIGIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Identify the major religious faiths that are coexisting in India since long past describe the religious groups of India with their brief history, main teachings, Holy Books scriptures and festivals, describe the population size, geographical distribution, socio-cultural and economic life of different religious groups explain the concept of religious pluralism in the context of India relate the contributions of different religions to the growth and development of a composite nature of Indian art, culture and society.

Keywords: Religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism.

Introduction

We all are aware that India is a secular democratic republic. The term secular means that the Government of India is not bound by any particular religious faith. There is no official religion in India as in the case of some other nations like Nepal and Pakistan. Indian citizens are free to follow their own religious faiths. The Constitution of India does not discriminate between different religions. Every religion is treated equally by the Constitution of India. In this Unit we will learn of the major religions of India.

Religious Situation in India: A Brief

The religious situation in India is very complex. It is due to the following facts: First, the number of different religions is very large. Indian population is divided into innumerable different faiths and sects. Secondly, different historical reasons and happenings have added to this complexity. Thirdly, the social composition of the followers of these diverse religions is also diverse. They practice different customs and traditions. The different religious communities have different types of social organisation also.

Classification of Religions in India

Some scholars have classified religions of India into five categories Religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous communities. Religion of the earliest migrants which in course of time became. Hinduism - the dominant religion of the region. The religions which emerged as a result of protest against dominant Hinduism : Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, Religions which are the results of conquest or colonization: Islam and Christianity. Religious groups which came as migrants: Jews, Zoroastrians and the followers of Bahai faith. The following table shows some of the major religions that are being practiced by different communities of India. The population strength of these religious communities according to 2001 Census is also mentioned.

Religion, Community, Population and Percentage

Hinduism	Hindus	828 million	80.5%
Jainism	Jain	4.2 million	00.4%
Zoroastrianism	Parsis	0.007million	00.0068%
Sikhism	Sikhs	19 million	01.9%
Islam	Muslims	128 million	13.4%
Christianity	Christians	24 million	02.3%
Buddhism	Buddhist	8 million	00.8%
Others (including Tribal religion)		6.6 million	0.64%
Not stated		0.7 million	0.068%
Total		1028million	100%

Hinduism

Hinduism, with its accompanying social caste system, evolved from the Vedic religion of Aryan invaders.

Origin Of The Word Hindu And The Hindu Way of Life

Hinduism is “A Way of Life”. There is no founder of Hinduism. The word “Hindu” is derived from the name of river Indus, which flows through northern India. In ancient times the river was called the ‘Sindhu’, but the Persians who migrated to India called the river ‘Hindu’, the land ‘Hindustan’ and its inhabitants ‘Hindus’. Thus the religion followed by the Hindus came to be known as ‘Hinduism’. The seeds of Hinduism were brought to India by the Aryans who settled along the banks of the Indus river about 2000 B. C. The Aryans first worshipped the forces of nature e.g., Surya, the Sun; Vayu, the Wind; Agni, the Fire. Hindus pray to and worship different gods and goddesses or deities. The most fundamental of Hindu deities, is the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva - Creator, Preserver and Destroyer respectively.

Some Basic Aspects of Hinduism

In Hinduism, the ultimate reality or the supreme power is nameless, formless, without a quality. Reality is one. But multiple paths to attain the goal are permitted. This means that all the different gods, belief systems and patterns of worships can co exist side by side. That is why the protestant Hindu religions such as Jainism and Buddhism as well as alien religions all coexisted harmoniously in India. Moreover, Hinduism has absorbed some of these groups socially through the caste system.

In Hinduism, we do not find strong ecclesiastical (religious) organization, congregational worship, and professional clergy. The social life of the Hindus is controlled by the caste system and the Doctrine of Karma.

Hindus believe in “Karma” - law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds and in “Reincarnation”, that is, rebirth of the soul in a new body. Hindus also believe in “Moksha” or Salvation - a belief that one can get free from the bondage of life through spiritual knowledge like meditation and yoga, etc.

Popular Hindu Festivals

Some of the popular Hindu festivals are Deepawali, Holi, Dussehra, Ganesh Chaturthi, Pongal, Janamasthmi and Shiva Ratri. These innumerable festive occasions lend Hinduism its amazing popular appeal and make the Indian tradition rich and colorful.

Books of Hinduism

Vedas: The 4 Vedas are : The Rig Veda - “Royal Knowledge”, The Sama Veda - “Knowledge of Chants” The Yajur Veda - “Knowledge of Sacrificial Rituals”. The Atharva Veda - “Knowledge of Incantations Vedas are the earliest Hindu scripts and are a collection of poetic hymns in praise of the Supreme power (God). Upanishads define the basic philosophy of the religion, such as Karma, Dharma, and the Caste System. There are 108 extant Upanishads, of which 10 are most important: Isa, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka. Ramayana: The other great composition is the epic called the Ramayana written by Valmiki. It describes the story of Rama (a representative of God Vishnu), the king of Ayodhya. Rama’s wife Sita was abducted by Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka. Rama fought a war against Ravana and defeated him. Ramayana presents the ideology of king Rama and his love for his country. Mahabharata: The world’s longest epic poem and one of the greatest Hindu epic was composed by Visa Diva It was written in about 9th century BC, and deals with the power struggle between the Pandava and the Kaurava families, with an intertwining of numerous episodes that make up life and also describes the story of Vedic era. Bhagavad-Gita The Bhagavad-Gita describes Hindu ideals and tells about the path to become a saint or yogi. It contains some of the most brilliant theological lessons about the nature of God and of life ever written. Lord Krishna explains the details of life to his friend Arjuna who was hesitant to fight a war, known as the “The War of Kurushetra” that involved relatives and friends. The Bhagavad-Gita is part of the great Hindu Epic, the Mahabharata.

Religions That Emerged as Protests against Hinduism

In the Sixth century BC, Indian society for the first time saw two major religious protest movements challenging the authority of orthodox Brahmanism. These are Jainism and Buddhism. Let us first know about Jainism and the Janis.

Jainism

Jainism denied the authority of the Vedas and revolted against Vedic sacrifices. It upheld the conditions of the common people. It asserted the common spiritual right of all men. Moreover, Jainism preached compassion and love for all forms of life. All the Jaina preaching was done in the language of the common people. It rejected the use of Brahminic language the Sanskrit. Thus common masses could understand without the help of the Brahmins.

Story of Mahavira

Jainism was propagated by Mahavira in the sixth century B.C. Mahavira was a prince and his childhood name was Vardhaman. Being the son of a king, he had many worldly pleasures, comforts, and services at his command, but at the age of thirty he left his family and the royal household, gave up his worldly possessions, and became a monk in search of a solution to eliminate pain, sorrow, and suffering from life. Mahavira spent the next twelve and one half years in deep silence and meditation to conquer his desires, feelings, and attachments. Mahavira established a monastic community of both nuns and monks. He was the last of the spiritual lineage of the twenty-four Tirthankarsthe teachers of Jainism who taught a path to religious awakening based on renouncing the world by the practice of strict religious austerity. At the age of 72 (527 BC), Lord Mahavira attained nirvana (death) and his purified soul left his body and achieved complete liberation.

Jaina Philosophy

The doctrine of Karma occupies a significant position in the Jain philosophy. For the Jains, at the heart of right conduct lie the five great vows:

- non-injury (ahimsa),
- non-lying (satya),
- non-stealing (asteya),
- non-possession (aparigraha) and
- chastity (brahmacharya).

Jainism places special emphasis on “ahimsa” or non-injury to all living beings. This concern for life is extended to all creatures, even the minute microbes that are not visible. Some rigidly orthodox Jains are seen with white muslin cloths over their mouths to keep out flying insects, and they are encouraged to use small brooms to gently sweep away living creatures from their path, so as not to accidentally crush them.

Buddhism

Although there are only a few million Buddhists in India, the religion is of great importance because it had its birthplace here. Buddhism is not centered with a god. It does not have supernatural elements. It is a system of philosophy and a code of morality. Buddhism was founded in northern India about 500 B.C. when Siddhartha Gautama, born a Prince, achieved enlightenment.

Four Noble Truths

Breaking through the final barriers, Buddha achieved the knowledge that he later expressed as the Four Noble Truths:

- Everybody’s life is filled with suffering from birth to death
- Suffering is caused by people desiring/wanting worldly things
- By controlling desires and wants suffering will end
- The Eightfold Path teaches us how to control these wants

Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Paths are:

- The true understanding of the Four Noble Truths.
- The true thought : having friendly thoughts about people and all forms of life.
- The true speech :speak nicely and honestly and avoid harsh words against anyone or anything.
- The true action : act from your heart and do not be vain and avoid violence.
- The true work : work in a profession that will not hurt another.
- The true effort : work to improve yourself.
- The true mindfulness : be compassionate and think before you act, and
- The right concentration : focus and concentrate on religious meditation.

In India, Buddhism developed rapidly when Emperor Asoka, the Great embraced it. His capital was Patna and he declared Buddhism as the state religion. He put up monuments associated with the Buddha, and erected the Asoka Pillar. By the third century B.C., the still-young religion based on the Buddha’s teachings was being spread throughout South Asia through the agency of the Mauryan Empire (ca. 326-184 B.C). By the seventh century A.D., having spread throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia, Buddhism probably had the largest religious following in the world. There was once a decline in the following of Buddhism in India due to the decrease in the number of followers, but the Buddhist revival began in India in 1891, when the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala founded the Maha Bodhi Society. Its activities expanded to involve the

promotion of Buddhism in India. In June 1892, a meeting of Buddhists was organized at Darjeeling. Dharmapala spoke to the Tibetan Buddhists and presented a relic of the Buddha to be sent to the Dalai Lama.

Buddhist Scriptures

The sacred scriptures of the Buddhists are in Pali. The word “Pali” means simply “Text” or “sacred Text”. These scriptures are called Tipitaka or Tripitaka meaning “Threefold Baskets”. The three baskets of the law are

- Vinaya Pitaka
- Sutta Pitaka
- Abhidamma Pitaka

The Vinaya Pitaka mainly deals with the rules and regulations, which the Buddha promulgated for the future disciples of the order of monks or Bhikkus and nuns. The Sutta Pitaka consists chiefly of discourses both small and long as delivered by the Buddha himself on various occasions. The Abhidamma Pitaka contains the profound philosophies of the Buddha’s teachings. It investigates matter and mind, the two composite factors of the so-called being.

Sikhism

Like Buddhism and Jainism, Sikhism also emerged as a protest against some established religious practices. Compared to the other two, Sikhism is one of the youngest of the World Religions; it is barely 500 years old. It was founded by Shri Guru Nanak Dev in 1469 A.D. who fought against the dominance of the Brahmin priests and their legal controls. He also fought against the Islamic orthodoxy. Thus he rejected both Hinduism and Islam. At the same time, he also fused or blended the main teachings of both the religions.

Basic Principles

The word ‘Sikh’ means a disciple. Thus, Sikhism is essentially the path of discipleship. Sikhism represents the middle path between sensual life style and austere life of renunciation. The Sikh needs to do his duty to his family and to the community but should lead a life that is pure and moral, full of noble deeds and kind words. Just as the lotus keeps its blossom over and above the surface of water, Sikhism teaches a Sikh to lead a life within society, fulfilling societal obligations, yet in a manner that is noble, true and compassionate. A Sikh does not regard fasting, austerities, pilgrimages and penance as important things. Sikhism lays emphasis upon the following :

- Faith in God
- Meditation of God
- Following the Truth
- Unattachment and desirelessness.
- Control over thought
- Association with holy men
- Humanity and submission to Hukam (God’s Will).

All the fundamentals of Sikhism emanate from the concept of love for God which follows the love of man. For a Sikh, all human beings are creatures of God and must be treated equally. One must work hard and share one’s earnings with the less fortunate which had to be earned by righteous means. One must be always active in mind and body.

Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji

Sikhism offered the people a simple Sikh religious teaching, “Oneness of God”, whose name is Truth? Nine Gurus followed Guru Nanak, and they all reinforced and added to what was taught by the first Guru. Guru Nanak held the importance of a Guru in order to obtain salvation. Importance was given more to the Word of Truth than to the person. Truth is changeless and eternal. “The Guru is the Word” i.e. Gurbani. Therefore, in 1708, the holy book of the Sikhs, The Shri GURU GRANTH SAHIB JI was proclaimed to be the only Guru (Gurbani) by the last Guru, Shri Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The Guru Granth Sahib is the “Living Guru”. This holy book embodies the philosophy and fundamentals of Sikhism. It is the only holy book of a major religion which was written and authenticated by its founders. The Guru Granth Sahib is the living embodiment of the ten Gurus. It represents the permanent aspect of the ‘Guru’.

Social Dimension

The Sikh community mainly represents two sections: the Khalsa and the Shahajdhari. The Khalsa is a community of baptized Sikhs who are ritually initiated into Sikhism and who have to follow the duties laid by Guru Gobind Singh, including the FIVE Ks i.e. PANJ KAKARS. These are:

- Worshipping one God and daily meditation of God.
- To keep the five symbols or Panj Kakars and lead life according to Gurus' teachings
- After joining the brotherhood he has no caste.
- Must abstain from shaving or cutting hair, eating "halal meat", adultery and use of tobacco and other intoxicants.
- Must not commit any of the social offences as dowry, using liquors, raising monuments over graves.
- Must contribute one-tenth of his income for religious purposes.
- Serve the Sangat (community of Sikh believers) in all ways
- He must practice arms and be ready to defend the weak.

The Panj Kakars (5 symbols) are necessary for the strength and unity of the religion and also for the value each had. All Khalsa Sikhs are to have:

- Kesh** or uncut hair,
- a Kanga** or the comb to keep this hair neat and clean
- Kaccha** or the underwear worn as a symbol of agility and readiness for action,
- Kirpan** or sword which is an emblem of courage and adventure to be used for defensive purposes and lastly,
- Kada** or the Steel bracelet to remind the Sikh of his bond to the God.

A Khalsa is thus a saint-soldier. The Sahajdhari Sikhs are the non-baptised section of the Sikh community. They are the persons who have chosen the path of Sikhism, i.e. believe in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and all the tenets of Sikhism. They however, do not need to keep the Five Ks which are meant only for the Khalsa Sikhs. But, still they can keep some or all if they want to. The Khalsa Sikhs became the orthodox majority in the Sikh community. The Jat peasantry of middle and eastern Punjab mostly got baptised as Khalsa Sikhs. Eventually, under the dominance of the Khalsa the Sikh community came to be identified with the Khalsa and the Jats. Guru Panth Along with the concept of Guru Granth, there is the concept of Guru Panth in Sikhism. The word 'Panth' represents the entire system of beliefs and practices laid down in the Guru Granth Sahib as well as the Sikh community. Sometimes it is used to stand for Khalsa Panth as well. In Sikhism the Guru has two faces: one is the Guru Granth Sahib, which represents the Guru as a permanent aspect, the other is the Guru Pant, which thus, represents the Sikh collectivity, i.e. the Sikh community that follows the ways laid in the Guru Granth Sahib. The Panth is thus, the dynamic and evolving aspect. The Guru Panth underwent a big change with the establishment of the political party Shiromani Akali Dal in 1920. Since then, it has dominated the Sikh affairs both in religious and secular matters. A Khalsa Sikh is easily recognized by his beard (uncut and untrimmed) and uncut hair which he protects with a turban on his head.

Islam

Islam literally means "submission to God". Islam had its origin in what is now Saudi Arabia. Followers of this faith are called Muslims. It was with the advent of the Arab traders in India in the 7th century A.D. that the Islamic influence was first felt in India. In the Malabar region, the Mappila community was perhaps the first to have been converted to Islam owing to their close connection with the Arab traders. Thereafter, invasions from the West of India from the early part of the 10th century A.D. and eventually, the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate led to the increasing Islamic presence in India. Apart from the political and State efforts in the spread of Islam in medieval India, the Sufis played an important role in the spread of Islam.

Their unorthodox approach made it easier for people to accept this religion and also in bridging the gap between Islam and the indigenous traditions. They attracted many from the artisan and untouchable communities. Sufism is a religion of the heart, in which the most important thing is to seek God. The aim is God alone. It is devotional based on love, harmony and beauty. It seeks to find divine love and knowledge through direct personal experiences. Sufism considers that each individual has its own principles best suited for it. It sympathises all religions. As a movement it arose after the death of Prophet Mohammad (632A.D.) among different groups within Islam who found orthodox Islam spiritually stifling. Practices include recitation of the name of God and certain phrases from the Quran Islam was basically propounded by the prophet Mohammed. The two main sects of this religion are Sunni and Shiite Muslims with many other minor sects. The 5 pillars of Islam are - Faith in Allah, Praying –five times a day, Almsgiving, Keeping the Fast and the Pilgrimage to Mecca. The Koran which means "to recite" in Arabic is the one sacred scriptures of the Islamic faith.

Mohammed, the prophet

Mohammed, the prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 A.D. in a tribe that acted as custodians of the Kaaba with the family business of supplying drinking water to the pilgrims. As Mohammed spoke against the worship of idols, the priests of Kaaba and the merchants of Mecca who depended on Pilgrim trade were angry and plotted against his life and so, he fled to the north to Yathrib, later known as Medina. In 630 A.D., Mohammed entered Mecca and destroyed the idols in Kaaba, leaving only the Black stone. This shrine was announced as the Sanctuary of Allah, the holy spot in Islam. Since then, Muslims at Prayer, wherever in the world they may be, face towards Mecca as they kneel. Prophet Mohammad gave the final form to an already existing religion. Muslims are also referred to as Mohammedans.

Five Pillars

Islam is a noble yet simple religion based on 5 pillars of principal acts of faith as Mohammad preached:

- Faith in Allah - One who says from heart “La ilaha illa llah; Muhammad rasulu’llah”, means that there is no God but Allah with Muhammad as messenger, is a Muslim. According to Islam God is only one. Muhammad is the last prophet.
- Prayer, five times a day – The earth belongs to Allah, God and so prayers should be offered whenever the hours are free for prayers. On Friday noon Prayers, Men and boys are expected to go to mosque if possible where the Imam, the officer of the mosque leads the worship and delivers a sermon. Worship is also individual.
- Almsgiving - A part of the income or as desired, the believer of muslim faith gives away as charity to the poor and the needy or for the support of the mosque.
- Keeping the fast of Ramzan - During the ninth month, Ramzan of the Muslim year, Mohammad received his first revelations and so there is a belief that the doors of the Paradise open at this time during which Gabriel came to Mohammad and made him the messenger. The doors of hell are shut and the devils are in chains. Hence, fasting is held from sunrise until the sunset during the month.
- Pilgrimage to Mecca - Religious Muslims believe in making a haj or pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime. Only Muslims can enter Mecca in common brotherhood as one and follow the rules. In Islam there is the belief in life after death and Judgment day. A person is rewarded or punished in his after life according to his actions on Earth.

The Koran

In Arabic, the Koran/Qur’an means “to recite”. It is the only sacred scripture of the Islamic faith. Muslims believe that all 114 of its chapters, called suras, came to Mohammed as revelations from God. It is said that Archangel Jibrail (Gabriel) inspired Mohammed to recite the earliest verses of Koran. The Koran also refers to many events from Jewish and Christian scriptures. The Qur’an itself expresses that it is the book of guidance. Hence, it emphasises on the moral significance of an event instead of its historical narration.

The Hadith

The Hadith had originally been oral traditions of the actions of Muhammad and customs which were later put down in a written form. The Hadith serve as an essential supplement to and clarification of the Koran forming a part of Islamic Law. Thus, the Koran and the Hadith provide elaborate instructions for the Muslims on the ways of conducting themselves in their day to day life, both in religious and secular matters. These constitute the basics of Islamic jurisprudence (legal system).

Christianity

Christianity is the world’s biggest religion, with about 2.1 billion followers worldwide. It is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament. Jesus lived in Israel. Christianity originated in Israel. Christianity arrived in India almost about the same period as it arrived in Europe, meaning about 2000 years ago. 24 million i.e. 2.34% of India’s population are Christians.

Christianity began as a Jewish sect in the eastern Mediterranean and quickly grew in size and influence over a few decades. By the 4th century it had become the dominant religion within the Roman Empire. During the middle Ages, most of the remainder of Europe was Christianized, with Christians also being a (sometimes large) religious minority in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of India. Following the Age of Discovery, through missionary work and colonization, Christianity spread to the Americas and the rest of the world. Christianity has played a prominent role in the shaping of the Western civilization at least since the 4th century AD. Christianity has between 1.5 billion and 2.1 billion adherents, representing about a quarter to a third of the world’s population.

Adherents of Christianity, known as Christians, believe that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God and the Messiah (Christ) prophesied in the Hebrew Bible (the part of the scripture common to Christianity and Judaism).

Christianity is a way of life centered on the worship of one God shown to the world through a Jewish man named Jesus. Jesus lived as a human being for almost 30 years in Palestine and was crucified by the Romans at Jerusalem between AD 29 and 33. Christians believe on the testimony of several witnesses that Jesus rose from the dead after 3 days and was seen by his disciples many times during the succeeding forty days. Christians do not worship a dead hero but the living Christ. Christianity is a historical and supernatural religion. Christian theology claims that Jesus Christ is a teacher, the model of a virtuous life, the revealer of God, as well as an incarnation of God and most importantly the savior of humanity who suffered, died, and was resurrected to bring about salvation from sin.

Christians maintain that Jesus ascended into heaven, and most denominations teach that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, granting everlasting life to his followers. Christians call the message of Jesus Christ the Gospel (“good news”) and hence label the earliest written accounts of his ministry as ‘gospels’. Christians world wide are divided into groups and communities called as the Church. All of them adhere to the main beliefs and principles of Christianity. However, the way these standards are codified, the details of the beliefs and the extent of conformity required varies from group to group.

Main Beliefs

Apostles’ Creed is one standard that is accepted by most of the Christian churches. It has an overall form based on the **Trinity**. The Trinity is an essential doctrine of mainstream Christianity. Trinity refers to the teaching that the one God comprises three distinct, eternally co-existing persons; the Father (from whom the Son and Spirit proceed), the Son (incarnate in Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit (God) Thus, it first deals with the Father, then the Son and finally the Holy Spirit.

God as Father and Creator

Christians believe in one God, who created the universe and all that is in it

Human beings are created in the image of God. With God, human beings share rationality, the capability of making decision, of relations with each other and with God.

God is the ‘Father’. God maintains personal relations with his creations. He is capable of affecting and being affected by others.

Christ, the son of God

According to Christians Jesus is an embodiment of God. He is the son of God who had sent him to this world to show the people the way of God.

The Holy Spirit and the Christian life

God as the Father and the Creator, Jesus as the Son of God and the Holy Spirit re considered as the three specific aspects of God which comprise the Trinity. The Holy Spirit has been considered by some denominations as a personal entity in the Trinity, being co-equal and coeternal with God the creator and His Son. Qualities like love, joy, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and the positive qualities which Christianity upheld are symbolized by the Holy Spirit. Some denominations, however, do not consider the Holy Spirit as a personal entity. Apart from these, the concept of Kingdom of God based on God’s rule, sin as disobedience to God, forgiveness, Judgment, and the concept of Heaven and Hell as reward and punishment on men based on their actions on earth are some important aspects of the beliefs of Christianity. The important festivals of the Christians are Christmas, Easter and Good Friday Commemorating respectively the birth of Christ, his burial and Resurrection (reappearance on the third day after his burial). In India, the Christians are distributed mainly in the following areas:

South India: Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Goa Daman and Diu.

North-East India: Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya,

Central India: Jharkhand region.

The main division of Christians in India is like it is in the Christian world, Protestants and Catholic. There are also different denominations among them, Syrian Church, Armenian Church, Anglican Church and others. There is also an Anglo-Indian community in India. Majority of the Indian Christians are Roman Catholics, accounting for a total of 17.3 million Members Indian Christians are basically converts from many different communities. Therefore, they are not politically united or organized. Most of the Indian Christians live

in rural areas. Although they are numerically small, yet their contributions in the service of education and health can never be ignored.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrians or the Parsis/Parsees (the Fire Worshippers) came to India from Persia in the 8th century A.D. in order to escape religious atrocities. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion founded by Zarathustra.

Basic Teachings and Philosophy

Zoroastrianism does not advocate asceticism or celibacy. Polygamy is permitted in this religion. Zoroastrianism advocates no fasts. Wines are used even in religious ceremonies. The essence of its ethics can be well summarized in three words:

Humata (good thought)

Hukkta (good words)

Huvarshta (good deeds)

The Parsi Community in India

Parsees practice Zoroastrianism. The Parsees are concentrated in Maharashtra and Gujarat states, especially in Mumbai. Their ancestors migrated from Iran in the 8th century to avoid persecution at the hands of Arab conquerors invading Persia. They were called Parsis to denote the region (Persia) from which they came. The Parsis worship fire and treat it as manifestations of the divinity of Ahura Mazda. They go to the “fire temple”. The Sanjan Atash Behram was the first “sacred fire” of the Parsees in India although it was destroyed and taken to Navsari. Today the fire rests in the new temple at the village of Udwada. It is a very close knit community. They are basically urban middle class in nature. They are very strictly endogamous. Parsis in India are highly educated, cultured and economically well-off. There are many private schools established by the wealthier members of the Parsis. Parsis are known to be very lovable people. The huge Tata industrial empire bears the name of one of India’s most famous Parsi families. Other famous Parsis are Dadabhai Nawroji, Jamshedji Tata, Dr Homi Jehangir Bhabha, Sir Phirojshah Mehta, Sir Dinshaw Wacha, etc.

Conclusion

In the above sections we have discussed about the various religions and sects in India, their main teachings and principles and the number of followers in India along with the socio-cultural and economic aspects. This brings us to the concept of Pluralism. Religious pluralism has the following elements: It is a view and practice wherein one’s own religion is not considered the only source of truth. It is held that there are other equally valid claims. The differences are accepted and respected. Additionally, religious pluralism sometimes means the emphasis of the common aspects of the different religions. Harmonious relationship among religions is secured by focusing upon the common aspects of the religions. Sometimes, religious pluralism is meant to be equivalent of ecumenism. It means the promoting of some level of unity, cooperation and improved understanding between different religions and different sects of a religion by means of inter-religious dialogue. This dialogue is such that each religion learns from each other, but without trying to convince the other of the correctness of one religion’s set of beliefs. The perpetuation of every society requires some degree of harmony among the various groups, their goals, ideologies and practices. We have already learnt about the mechanisms and aspects by which a society maintains some degree of social harmony. In a society as varied as India having various religions and various ethnic groups, it becomes important that an attitude and practice of religious pluralism be developed among its members for the maintenance of social harmony. The Constitutional rights guaranteed to the Indian citizens, the Constitutional provisions, other institutions and agencies in Indian society provides the foundational elements for a pluralist society. The Indian Constitution has guaranteed equal rights in political, social, cultural, educational and religious spheres to all its citizens, ethnic groups and religions. It has made discrimination of citizens as unlawful. This serves as the foundation upon which a democratic and multicultural society with religious pluralism can be raised and promoted. The society needs the emergence of complementary institutions that realise this. Such institutions and practices characterize the Indian society. At the same time fundamentalist forces also are operative in India. Indian society is marked by some degree of conflict in this sphere. It remains to be seen in which direction the members of the greater Indian society succeed in designing the future of the nation. India is a land of various religions and sects. Home to a number of religions, the greater Indian society has accommodated all these religions giving it an Indian flavour. Developing within the context of our multicultural society, the various religions have become Indianised. At the same time, having linkages with the counterparts in other nations and national societies, they serve as medium

of inter-societal and international socio-cultural relations. The Indian Constitutional and statutory provisions in interaction with the practices shall shape the future of the nation.

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