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## UNIT 4 ASHRAM MOVEMENT

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The origin of âshrams in India is traced back to the pre-Christian period. Christian Âshrams are of recent origin. Sometimes the motivations behind the establishment of Christian Âshrams were not understood and as a consequence misinterpreted. Our aim in this unit will be to:

- have a clear idea of what âshrams mean
- to understand the convergences and divergences between âshrams of different religious traditions and Christian Âshrams.

Therefore to proceed in this regard it is necessary to discuss very briefly the origin of âshrams in India and the origin and development of Christian Âshrams.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The word *âsrama* is derived from the root *æram*, to exert oneself. It means a place where austerities are performed, a heritage. It may mean also the action of performing such austerities.

There were two currents of thought and life-styles, the *brâhmañic* and *úrmañic* in ancient India long before they came to the surface and became remarkable to the eyes of outsiders like Megasthenes from Greece in the Fourth Century BCE. The *brâhmañic* tendency was Aryan, orthodox ritualistic and materialistic while the *úrmañic* was unorthodox, non-ritualistic and spiritual.

It is probable that the *úrmañic* tendency had its origin in the Indus valley civilization. The archaeological remains of the cities Harappa – Mohenjodaro show that they were cities, which flourished between 3000 and 2000 BCE and they were more advanced in culture than the Aryans. The people who lived in

these cities were a settled down peaceful population. There are at least three seals depicting a God in yogic posture, *padmâsana*. They may be an indication of *úrâmaðic* tendency prevalent in the Indus valley civilization. It is possible that when *brâhmaðic* ritualism began to dominate, the Aryans with a deep spiritual bent adopted or absorbed the *úrâmaðic* tendency prevalent in Indus valley civilization.

It seems that âshrams originated in more than one way.

- 1) Deeply spiritual minded Aryans fed up with the ritualism and sacrifices of the *brâhmaðic* period went into the forests to meditate on the symbolism of the sacrifices. Soon disciples gathered around them. It was at the origin of the *Âranyakas* and contributed to the origin of âshrams.
- 2) In the course of time, education had become the monopoly of Brahmins. In the beginning education was not obligatory for Brahmins. Later by the early upanisadic period, it was becoming obligatory. A Brahmin student had to spend at least 12 years with a *Guru* and study the *Vedas*. This period was one of strict discipline and the student had to practice chastity. Thus the time spent in education came to be called *brahmacarya*. When Vedic education was completed, the *brahmacârins* students had several options. They could go home, get married and thus enter *g<sup>o</sup>hasthâsrma*. Many opted for this. Or they could remain with the *Guru* for their whole life as *nai<sup>o</sup>pikas* leading a life of austerity. This also contributed to the origin of âshrams.
- 3) There were other students who retired to the forests to lead a life of austerities as *vânâprasthas*. Still others roamed about as *parivrajakas*, as those who left everything, *sannyasins* or *bhiksus*, beggars. Soon disciples gathered around them and âshrams began to be formed. The following factors alarmed the leaders of the society. There was an exodus of intelligent and excellent youth from the society rejecting marriage and family life either to stay with the *Guru* or to retire to the forest and so forth as seen above to seek experience of *brahman*. So the leaders of the civil society divided the whole Aryan life into *brahmacarya*, *g<sup>o</sup>hastha*, *vânâprastha* and *sannyâsa*, integrating various forms of life already in existence into one whole way of life. When Manu codified the laws, these stages became obligatory (Manu 6:37)

According to this system, every Arya had to be a *brahmacârin* in the house of a teacher, a *g<sup>o</sup>hastha*, found a family beget children especially a male child to continue the family line and get them settled in life. When these family obligations were fulfilled, he had to become a *vânâprastha*. Retire into the forest to lead a life of austerities. Finally, he became a *sannyâsin*, *parivrâjaka* or *bhiksu* living without home, without anything, living on alms, free from all earthly ties, waiting for his release. All these various stages of life was integrated into an Aryans system of life style.

To understand what is expected of a *Guru* in an âshram, we must know also the prescriptions, which the code of Manu imposes on a *sannyasin* as a *Guru* is considered to be a *sannyasin*:

Departing from his house, taking with him pure implements, *his water-pot and staff*, keeping silence, unallured by desire of objects near him, let him enter into the fourth order [*sannyâsa*] (Manu 6:41)

The *sannyasin* has to be completely self-controlled and equanimous (Manu 6:48)  
His attention is turned to God alone:

Delighted with meditating on the Supreme Spirit, sitting fixed in such meditation, without needing anything earthly, without one sensual desire, without any companions but his own soul let him live in this world seeking the bliss of the next (Manu 6.49)

So total renunciation and deep experience of God is expected from a *sannyasin* and a *Guru*:

There are numerous Hindu Âshrams all over India.

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## 4.2 HINDU ASHRAMS

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Âshrams existed in India from Vedic times. They lost their prominence to some extent due to Muslim domination, followed by the British. With English education, scholarly studies on Hinduism by European and Indian scholars brought about an Indian renaissance in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This renaissance influenced also âshram movements.

Sri Rama Krishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), a Hindu mystic entered into a variety of mystical experiences and taught the equality and complimentary nature of various religions. Soon disciples flocked around him and thus an âshram came into existence. But the one who founded a monastic community and gave a solid organization to it was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a disciple of Rama Krishna.

### Rama Krishna Math

Vivekananda established an âshram at Belur near Calcutta in 1899. There the friends and followers of Ramakrishna came together to lead a celibate, monastic life as a community. The conditions for admission to the math was that the candidate should be between the age of eighteen and twenty five, should have good health, good character, monastic temperament, ready to do any service and faith in Rama Krishna. They could be of any caste, creed or sect. After three years of probation, they are sent to study Hindu religion and philosophy for two years. Those who are found suitable are accepted as *brahmacârins* after taking 12 vows. After a training of nine years, those who are found fit are initiated into *sannyâsa*. They are given the ochre-coloured habit and a new name.

The *âshramites* follow the non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy of Sankara. Following Rama Krishna's experience worship of a personal God is allowed.

### Gandhian Âshram

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, later Mahatma Gandhi gave a new orientation to âshram integrating both old and new elements. He took the vow of celibacy with the permission of his wife Kasturbai in 1906. He founded the Satyagraha Âshram on May 25, 1915 at Kochrab Ahmedabad. Sat means truth and Agraah means firmness. The members are to make constant effort towards the service of the country, not inconsistent with universal good. There were prayers in the morning and evening and spinning yarn during the day.

The âshramites observed 11 vows. They are: 1. Truth, 2. Non-Violence or love, 3. Chastity, 4. Control of the Palate, 5. Non-stealing, 6. Non-possession or poverty, 7. Physical labour, 8. Swadeshi, 9. Fearlessness, 10. Removal of untouchability, 11. Equality of religions.

There were three categories of members in the âshram. They were: 1. Managers, who took the vows, 2. Candidates, who are to follow âshram observances 3. Students, boys and girls above four years. On reaching maturity after 10 years of education, they have the option to take the vows or leave.

**Ramana Âshram, Tiruvannamalai**

Ramana Maharsi (1879-1950) was born at Tirucculi near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. At the age of seventeen, he had a deep religious experience and began a life of contemplation and lived in a cave in Tiruvannamalai or Arunachala a sacred hill. Soon it became a place of pilgrimage and people of all sorts followed him.

He followed the *advaitic* tradition. To teach *advaitic* experience he proposed a simple method: who am I? and self enquiry. Irrespective of caste, creed or religion, all can follow this self-enquiry and reach *advaitic* experience. His approach was universal. God, the self and the world are indivisible. A person has to lead a life of tranquillity, non-violence and meditation to reach this experience.

Community life in the âshram is unrestricted. Each one is free to lead his or her life. Members were not obliged to attend the daily recitation of the *Vedas*. They met at meals if they wished so.

There are numerous Hindu Âshrams with lot of differences, yet following basically Indian tradition. Hindu Âshrams inspired Christian missionaries to think of founding âshrams.

**Check Your Progress I**

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Trace the ways how the Ashrams in India originated.

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2) Bring out some the characteristics of Gandhian Ashram.

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### 4.3 CHRISTIAN ÂSHRAMS

There have been lot of misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Christian Âshram movement. There were also violent denunciations of the movement by authors like Sita Ram Goel, however a minority. Even Christians were not able to understand the movement. It is not possible to enter into this controversy as it could require more than a volume to answer the objections and clear misunderstandings. Here an effort is made to present the Christian Âshram Movement in the proper light, at least for well meaning Christians and people of various faiths.

#### Movements

A number of Christian beliefs and experiences contributed to the origin of Christian Âshram movement. In the first three centuries of Christianity, it was the experience of the Risen Christ, the witness of martyrs and the command of Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to all the nations, which motivated Christian missionary activity. Later, salvation motive, that of saving souls inspired missionary enthusiasm. As the Church and theologians came to a better understanding and contact with other religions, salvation motive gave way to inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. In the meanwhile, hunger and poverty of the millions of people in developing countries, the oppression of the poor by the rich drew the attention of theologians. So liberation of the human person from all forms of slavery and oppression became an important motive for evangelization. The contact with the deep religious experience of Indian religious traditions, their spirit of renunciation attracted many of those who were interested in contemplation and mysticism. So sharing religious experience and inter-religious dialogue became part of evangelization. Âshrams were found most suitable for these purposes.

All these have been misunderstood and misinterpreted as a hidden agenda for making conversions. Some clarity as regards conversions is also necessary. There is a false assumption that Hinduism is not a missionary religion and so it is not engaged in making conversions. Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* has described the conquest, colonization and inculturation of South-East Asia by Hinduism. In modern times, there were and there are a succession of Hindu missionaries from Vivekananda to Radhakrishnan and to modern *Gurus*, God-men and God women making millions of converts to Hinduism all over the world. So religious traditions have to abandon prejudices and “holier than thou” attitudes, come together and agree on some basic principles.

One of such principle is that conversion is a fundamental right of the individual and no one has a right to prevent it. Forced conversion should never be made. As Keshub Chunder Sen said, none of these gigantic religions would cease to exist. They will not be able to swallow one another. Instead of engaging themselves in a game of blaming each other under various pretexts, let them be open and agree on some minimum principles and work together for the betterment of humanity. To achieve it âshrams can do significant service.

#### First Attempt

Robert De Nobili (1577-1656) was the first Christian missionary to make an attempt to establish a Christian Âshram in India. He was born in a noble family

in Rome, became a Jesuit came to India to preach the Gospel. He found that missionaries were held in contempt due to their association with colonialists and practicing what appeared abominable to the Hindus like drinking, eating meat etc. Moreover, there was an unhealthy identification of Christianity with Portuguese culture, which was totally wrong. Christianity by its very nature is inter-cultural and transcultural. So De Nobili decided to adopt the life style of an Indian *Sannyasin*. He was sincere. So he did not present himself as a *brahmin*, but *Ksatria* which was correct as he belonged to the Italian nobility.

Did De Nobili plan to start an âshram as such? It does not seem so. De Nobili's âshram was a natural evolution. He became a *sannyasin* and adopted fully the life style of an Indian *sannyasin* like silence, vegetarian food, bath, etc. So the youth was attracted. Several became his disciples and thus an âshram way of life came into existence. With the suppression of the Society of Jesus, these types of âshram life cease to exist. Years later, a more systematic effort was made.

### The Second Attempt

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907) whose original name was Bhawani Charan Banerji was born in Khanyan a village about 30 miles north of Calcutta. He joined the *Brahma Samaj*. In February 1891, he was baptized into the Anglican Church and in September of the same year he entered the Catholic Church and took the name Brahmabandhab. He wanted to start a Catholic Âshram.

In May 1898, Brahmabandhab wrote in his Journal Sophia:

“Monastic life is exceedingly congenial to the soil of India. In this age of materialism when contemplative life is despised India is still dotted with monasteries... considered from all points it is extremely desirable that steps be soon taken for the founding of a *Maṭha* (monastery) in India where Hindu Catholics may be trained to monastic life.”

Brahmabandhab envisaged two types of *sannyasins*; those who lead a life of contemplation in the monastery and itinerant ones who will preach the Gospel everywhere. They are to lead a very austere life. There should not be the least trace of Europeanism in their mode of life.

Mgr. Zalesrki, the Apostolic Delegate to India from 1892-1916 was opposed to this project. Mgr. Dalhoff sj, Archbishop of Bombay, who had consulted Zaleski was also opposed to it. Through Mgr. Charles Pelvat msfs, Bishop of Nagpur knew about this opposition, he allowed Brahmabandhab to open a Catholic Âshram close to Marble Rocks on the Narmada not far from Jabalpur. The âshram was opened in the beginning of 1899 with Brahmabandhab, Animananda from Sind, two Brahmin youth from Calcutta and another youth Shankerji from Tinneveli, Tamil Nadu following Indian âshramic tradition, they lived a very austere life, begged their food, cooked it by themselves and spent time in fasting and prayer. The caste distinctions were kept up.

Though begun well, the Apostolic Delegate Zaleski forced Bishop Pelvat to withdraw permission. The Bishop advised Upadhyaya to submit the proposals to Rome for approval. Brahmabanadhab decided to do so in person began his journey but he fell ill on reaching Bombay. On recovering he did not pursue the matter. Thus ended the second attempt to establish a Catholic Âshram.

The ecclesiastical opposition, the impulsiveness and unsteadiness of Upadhyaya caused its failure. On the positive side, the âshram had assimilated the simplicity and austerity of life with meditation and sacramental life. The maintaining of caste distinctions was certainly negative. It was contrary to Indian religious spirit as *sannyasa* transcends *dharma*s. It was against Christian spirit because Christianity promotes the equality of all human beings. All the same, this experiment was not in vain. For it inspired two European missionaries 50 years later to take up the challenge again to found an âshram which will integrate Indian âshramic spirituality.

### **The Third Attempt**

The third attempt to establish a regular Catholic Âshram was undertaken by Abbe Monchanin (1895-1957) a French missionary, a man of vast culture who had a predilection for India and Fr. Henri Le Saux (1910-1973) a French Benedictine monk with a passionate interest in *advaitic* experience. They founded the *Saccidananda Âshram* in Shantivanam in Kulitalai, a village on the bank of the river Caveri not far from Tiruchirapalli. Monchanin took the name, Swami Parama arubi anandam and Le Saux, Abhishiktananda. Both felt that contemplation and its structured form monasticism were the best means of entering into dialogue with Hinduism and of manifesting the spiritual nature of the Catholic Church.

This effort also did not succeed due to the following reasons. The local clergy were not sympathetic to inculturation. There were no vocations. Monchanin passed away in Paris in 1957. Abhishiktananda was much concerned about integrating *advaitic* experience into Christian life. So he left the âshram and became a hermit in Rishikesh. Thus ended the third attempt.

But their attempt was not fruitless. These failures paved the way for future successes. They had clearly laid down the basic principles, which govern a Christian Âshram. Abhishiktananda continued to encourage the founding of Christian Âshrams even coming out of his solitude occasionally for the same purpose.

### **Kurisumala Âshram**

The idea of founding an âshram in Kurisumala was conceived at Shantivanam in 1955 by a Cistercian monk Fr. Francis Mathew (1912- ) as Belgian monk, later known as Francis Acharya and Fr. Bede Griffiths (1906- ) a Benedictine monk from England. The âshram takes its name from the place where it is established. After spending some time in Shantivanam, they established the Âshram in Kurisumala in 1958 under the Syro-Malankara diocese of Thiruvalla. Three currents of monastic thought and spirituality merge in Kurisumala. They are the Cistercian pattern of life, the Syrian liturgy and the monastic tradition of India. The dress, food and way of life are those of âshrams in India.

### **Saccidananda Âshram**

We have seen that Saccidananda Âshram ceased to exist with the death of Monechanin and Abhishiktananda becoming a hermit. In 1968, Abhishiktananda handed over Saccidananda Âshram to Bede Griffiths who left Kurisumala and came down to Kulilalai to start the Âshram again. Under his guidance, Saccidananda Âshram became one of the leading Catholic Âshrams in India.

The Âshram became a center of inter religious dialogue and a place where many came to seek guidance. These initiatives came from European missionaries. Soon Indians themselves came forward.

**Anjali Âshram**

Fr. D.S. Amalorpavadass (1932-1990) opened Anjali Âshram on August 15, 1979. It is a very systematically planned Âshram almost in every aspect from its layout to religious ideals and spirituality. The founder had an integral vision of an âshram. Anjali Âshram is to promote Indian Spirituality, contemplation, inter-religious dialogue, social service, liberation of the poor, ecumenism and multi- religious community.

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**4.4 ÂSHRAMS AND CATHOLIC WOMEN  
RELIGIOUS**

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The Catholic Women Religious of India have made a significant contribution to Âshram movement in India. Sister Sara Grant and Sister Vandana called Vandana Maraji both belonging to the congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and disciples of Abhishiktananda have contributed much to Âshram Movement. Both co-operated in the re-establishment of the Christa Prema Seva Âshram in Pune. Later Vandana Mataji started on her own Jeevan Dhara Âshram in Garkwal Hills, U.P. She wrote *Gurus, Âshrams and Christians* and edited *Christian Âshrams, A Movement with a Future?* Both Sisters were involved in promoting ecumenism; inter religious dialogue and Indian spirituality.

**Check Your Progress II**

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) What are the movements that gave rise to Christian Ashrams?
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- 2) Examine the relationship between Christian Ashrams and women.
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## 4.5 PROTESTANT ÂSHRAMS

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Although Catholics were the first to start âshrams, as seen earlier, the movement was stopped for more than 40 years after Brahmabandhab. In the meanwhile Protestants started a number of âshrams.

**Christukula Âshram:** Dr. S. Jesudasan and Dr. Ferrester Paton founded the christukula âshram in Tirupattur in Tamil Nadu in March 1921. The chief aim of the âshram was growth in spiritual life. After the death of Jesudasan, prayer and guidance of the Holy Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God became general to the training of members. The full-fledged members were called sevaks. To be a sevak, one had to make a novitiate of three years and to take temporary vows for three years, which could be renewed. The daily programme consisted of prayer, meditation, work, study, recreation and village visit. Taking inspiration from this âshram, a number of protestant âshrams came into existence. By 1950, there were about 30 âshrams.

**Christa Prema Seva Âshram (CPSA):** Fr. Jack Winslow belonging to the Anglican Church founded CPSA in Shivajinagar, Pune in 1927. The âshram community consisted of three orders, first order of celibate men, Second order of celibate women and Third Order of married people. The âshramites sought to follow Christ as their Lord and Master in renunciation and sacrifice, in selfless service to people. Due to various reasons, this âshram was closed in 1962.

In 1972, the âshram was reopened again with an ecumenical community of women composed of Anglican Sisters of St. Mary the Virgin from Panch Howd and the Roman Catholic Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from Sophia College, Bombay. The CPSA belongs to the Church of North India (CNI). Sisters Sara Grant and Vandana of Sacred Heart Sisters did significant service in the re-establishment of this âshram as an ecumenical community.

So far, the origin and development of âshrams have been dealt with now we shall suggest some basic principles and characteristics that should animate âshrams in general and Indian Christian Âshrams.

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## 4.6 FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ÂSHRAM

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- 1) Every âshram adheres to its faith and religious tradition whether Hindu, Buddhist, Jain or Christian. They bear witness to their faith and religious traditions without fanaticism, without any forms of violence or intolerance.
- 2) Âshrams share their own experience of the Ultimate Reality, their spiritual experience in a spirit of peace and tranquility.
- 3) Âshrams are open to the teachings of various religious traditions; show respect to them even if they are contrary to their own belief systems.
- 4) Âshrams are places of prayer, meditation and worship as demanded by their own religious traditions.
- 5) Contemplation of Divine Realities and Mysteries holds the highest place in Âshrams

- 6) A spirit of complete silence is fostered in the âshram except in times of recreation. Silence is a symbol of the transcendence and immanence of the Absolute whose spirit pervades the âshram.
- 7) Âshrams remain open to the variety of religious experiences of various religious traditions and respect them.
- 8) Âshrams are to be places of inter-religious dialogue, peace and harmony. They foster inter-religious understanding and friendship.
- 9) Âshrams follow a life of simplicity and poverty. They bear witness to the spirit of renunciation, which animated the ancient sages of India.
- 10) They welcome all seekers of truth and offer them support and guidance in their search for truth.
- 11) In âshrams, there is no caste distinction. The equality of all humans are accepted. Theistic âshrams foster the Fatherhood of God and the brother hood and sister hood of men and women.
- 12) Âshrams are centers of moral rectitude and integrity. They avoid entering into any form of politics as politics corrupt religious traditions.
- 13) Âshrams take an active interest in the social concerns of the people.

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**4.7 SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES AND  
CHARACTERISTICS OF CATHOLIC  
ÂSHRAMS**

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It is understood that the general principles enunciated for all âshrams apply equally to Catholic Âshrams.

- 1) A Catholic Âshram bears witness to the faith of the Catholic Church, promote respect and obedience to the hierarchy of the Church.
- 2) A Catholic Âshram confesses Christ as Lord and Saviour, God incarnate, and shares the experience of the Risen Christ.
- 3) While giving great importance to prayer, meditation and contemplation, they also follow the sacramental life of the Church.
- 4) The Holy Eucharist and Eucharistic worship and contemplation occupy a principal place in the âshram.
- 5) The âshram fosters Indian Spirituality and ways of worship. It assumes whatever may be directly assumed from Indian tradition like simplicity of life, poverty, and renunciation.
- 6) A Catholic Âshram remains open to all religious traditions, transcends all forms of caste and discrimination. Every one is welcomes as a brother or sister.
- 7) A Catholic Âshram is a place of inter-religious dialogue and harmony. Every religious tradition is respected.

- 8) Each âshram has a *Guru* whose authority is respected.
- 9) Members of the âshram form a single community of one heart and one mind, community that loves and cares for everyone, thus bearing witness to the love of Christ.
- 10) A catholic âshram is concerned about the poverty of the poor. They practice solidarity with the poor and support them in their struggle for liberation.
- 11) A Catholic Âshram fosters human rights and offers support to human rights movements and organizations.
- 12) The Âshram remains open to all cultures and cultural differences.
- 13) A Catholic Âshram is to be a witness to the moral conscience of humanity, promoting life in all forms, opposing whatever degrades humanity and concerned about the well being of the whole creation.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Mention some of the characteristics of Ashrams in General.

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4.8 LET US SUM UP

Traditionally, an ashram is a religious hermitage. Today the term *ashram* (Hindu or Christian) often denotes a locus of Indian cultural activity such as yoga, music study or religious instruction and meditation. The ashrams would usually be located in secluded natural surroundings conducive to spiritual instruction and meditation. The residents of an ashram regularly perform spiritual and physical exercises, such as the various forms of Yoga.

These ashrams have always been a powerful symbol of unity, liberty, equality and fraternity throughout Indian history, and thus ashram movement transcends the barriers of caste, creed and religion.

4.9 KEY WORDS

- Asrama** : The word *âsrama* is derived from the root *œram*, to exert oneself. It means a place where austerities are performed, a heritage. It may mean also the action of performing such austerities.
- Padmasana** : God in yogic posture.

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## 4.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

It seems that āshrams originated in more than one way.

- 1) Deeply spiritual minded Aryans fed up with the ritualism and sacrifices of the *brāhmaṇic* period went into the forests to meditate on the symbolism of the sacrifices. Soon disciples gathered around them. It was at the origin of the *Āranyakas* and contributed to the origin of āshrams.

In the course of time, education had become the monopoly of Brahmins. In the beginning education was not obligatory for Brahmins. Later by the

early upanisadic period, it was becoming obligatory. A Brahmin student had to spend at least 12 years with a *Guru* and study the *Vedas*. This period was one of strict discipline and the student had to practice chastity. Thus the time spent in education came to be called *brahmacarya*. When Vedic education was completed, the *brahmacârins* students had several options. They could go home, get married and thus enter *g<sup>o</sup>hasthâsrma*. Many opted for this. Or they could remain with the *Guru* for their whole life as *nai<sup>o</sup>pikas* leading a life of austerity. This also contributed to the origin of âshrams.

There were other students who retired to the forests to lead a life of austerities as *vânaprasthas*. Still others roamed about as *parivrajakas*, as those who left everything, *sannyasins* or *bhiksus*, beggars. Soon disciples gathered around them and âshrams began to be formed. The following factors alarmed the leaders of the society. There was an exodus of intelligent and excellent youth from the society rejecting marriage and family life either to stay with the *Guru* or to retire to the forest and so forth as seen above to seek experience of *brahman*. So the leaders of the civil society divided the whole Aryan life into *brahmacarya*, *g<sup>o</sup>hasta*, *vânaprastha* and *sannyâsa*, integrating various forms of life already in existence into one whole way of life. When Manu codified the laws, these stages became obligatory (Manu 6:37)

- 2) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, later Mahatma Gandhi gave a new orientation to âshram integrating both old and new elements. He took the vow of celibacy with the permission of his wife Kasturbai in 1906. He founded the Satyagraha Âshram on May 25, 1915 at Kochrab Ahmedabad. Sat means truth and Agraha means firmness. The members are to make constant effort towards the service of the country, not inconsistent with universal good. There were prayers in the morning and evening and spinning yarn during the day.

The âshramites observed 11 vows. They are: 1. Truth, 2. Non-Violence or love, 3. Chastity, 4. Control of the Palate, 5. Non-stealing, 6. Non-possession or poverty, 7. Physical labour, 8. Swadeshi, 9. Fearlessness, 10. Removal of untouchability, 11. Equality of religions.

There were three categories of members in the âshram. They were: 1. Managers, who took the vows, 2. Candidates, who are to follow âshram observances 3. Students, boys and girls above four years. On reaching maturity after 10 years of education, they have the option to take the vows or leave.

## Check Your Progress II

- 1) A number of Christian beliefs and experiences contributed to the origin of Christian Âshram movement. In the first three centuries of Christianity, it was the experience of the Risen Christ, the witness of martyrs and the command of Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to all the nations, which motivated Christian missionary activity. Later, salvation motive, that of saving souls inspired missionary enthusiasm. As the Church and theologians came to a better understanding and contact with other religions, salvation motive gave way to inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. In the meanwhile, hunger and poverty of the millions of people in developing countries, the oppression of the poor by the rich drew the attention of

theologians. So liberation of the human person from all forms of slavery and oppression became an important motive for evangelization. The contact with the deep religious experience of Indian religious traditions, their spirit of renunciation attracted many of those who were interested in contemplation and mysticism. So sharing religious experience and inter-religious dialogue became part of evangelization. Âshrams were found most suitable for these purposes.

- 2) The Catholic Women Religious of India have made a significant contribution to Âshram movement in India. Sister Sara Grant and Sister Vandana called Vandana Maraji both belonging to the congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and disciples of Abhishiktananda have contributed much to Âshram Movement. Both co-operated in the re-establishment of the Christa Prema Seva Âshram in Pune. Later Vandana Mataji started on her own Jeevan Dhara Âshram in Garkwal Hills, U.P. She wrote *Gurus, Âshrams and Christians* and edited *Christian Âshrams, A Movement with a Future?* Both Sisters were involved in promoting ecumenism; inter religious dialogue and Indian spirituality.

### Check Your Progress III

- 1) Every âshram adheres to its faith and religious tradition whether Hindu, Buddhist, Jain or Christian. They bear witness to their faith and religious traditions without fanaticism, without any forms of violence or intolerance.

Âshrams share their own experience of the Ultimate Reality, their spiritual experience in a spirit of peace and tranquility.

Âshrams are open to the teachings of various religious traditions; show respect to them even if they are contrary to their own belief systems.

Âshrams are places of prayer, meditation and worship as demanded by their own religious traditions.

Contemplation of Divine Realities and Mysteries holds the highest place in Âshrams

A spirit of complete silence is fostered in the âshram except in times of recreation. Silence is a symbol of the transcendence and immanence of the Absolute whose spirit pervades the âshram.

Âshrams remain open to the variety of religious experiences of various religious traditions and respect them.