
UNIT 1 HINDUISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we want to understand the Hindu religion in all its complexities. We will first learn about its sacred scriptures, ideas on God and human destiny. Finally we will examine its ethical teachings too.

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Identify the key Scriptures that contain the Hindu beliefs and practices
- Describe the principal ways God and human destiny are understood in Hinduism
- Examine the relevance of ethical teachings of Hinduism

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of the world and still influencing the life of over 80 % of our nation, 400 millions in South Asia and the Indian migrants in other parts of the world. Yet it has neither a founder-figure nor an organizational system. There is no creed defined as essential to it. It is so diverse in its beliefs and practices as to manifest the vast regional variations of the Subcontinent: geographical, climatic, ethnic, and linguistic groupings. Yet it has preserved its identity. This identity cannot be explained in terms of the common origin of beliefs in this land. For, religions like Buddhism and Jainism also have originated in this land, and have grown as religions in opposition to it. It was precisely in confrontation with them that Hinduism has developed its **self-awareness**. Again it was in the context of its encounter with other religions that it has also made its **self-affirmation**. Anyway the fact is that Hinduism has organically evolved like a single mainstream over its long life of over 4000 years.

The archaeological findings of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa have suggested that the earliest religion in the Subcontinent was centred on male god seated in a yogic posture surrounded by animals. There are certain clues to female figures and phallus-like stone objects. All these obviously indicate the cult of Shiva which perhaps was to loom large into later Shivism.

What is undisputable is that when the Aryan communities came to the Subcontinent from the northwest about 1500 BCE they found a striking contrast with the natives of the soil that they referred to them as ‘Dasus’, having darker skin, defending themselves from forts, worshiping phallus etc.. However, in course of time, a two-way process of interaction took place between the invading communities and the indigenous people. A hybrid kind of religious moorings began to develop over a long period until c 500 BCE. It was this new Indo-Aryan religion that was later called Hinduism. The earliest evidences of the Hindu religion are found in a vast number of hymns orally transmitted over six centuries (c1400 BCE – 800 BCE) called the **Veda** (literally meaning ‘knowledge’). They are the first Scriptures of Hinduism.

1.2 HINDU SCRIPTURES

The sacred scriptures of Hinduism are classified into two sets of literature: The **Sruti** and The **Smrti**

The Sruti Literature

The term ‘Sruti’ literally means “what was heard”. Vedas were what the highly spiritual people (Rshis) heard and orally passed on to the posterities. They were all ‘the revealed and the eternal’ truths. As such, therefore, they have primary authority. There are five kinds of Sruti literature: (i)Vedas, (ii) Brahmanas, (iii) Aranyakas and (iv)Upanishads.

The Vedas

The earliest literary manifestation of the Hindu religion are traced to a vast number of hymns orally transmitted over six centuries (c1400 BCE – 800 BCE). Eventually they became an exceptional body of sacred literature, called the **Veda**, because the ‘veda’ literally means ‘knowledge’, and to the orthodox Hindu they are the eternal words (vac), self-existent truths, constituting the divine revelation. They are ‘apaurusheya’, not human creation. The Rshis (seers) just ‘heard’ them through direct intuitive insight and transmitted them orally in the form of Mantras (chants) to the later generations who were destitute of this insight. Still later generation, lacking the power of oral communication, compiled them in three main collections (Samhitas) : *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and to which a fourth was later added by a sage by name *Atharvan*. Thus there are fourfold Vedas, of which the most important and the earliest collection is the Rig Veda (‘Royal knowledge’).It consists of hymns addressed to one or more gods, usually personifications of natural powers like Varuna deva (rain), Vayu deva (wind), Indira deva (thunder) Surya deva(sun), Usha devi (dawn). The Yajur and Sama contain sacrificial chants, and the Atharva Veda, mostly magical spells.

Brhamanas are mostly prose works appended to the Vedas, explaining the procedures of sacrificial rituals. The householder was enjoined to make different types of sacrificial rites to get their desired benefits. The basic belief was that the supernatural powers had to be appeased so that they would properly fulfil their roles. In this connection the law of karma (the law of causation) was first mentioned in the sense that such and such a sacrifice would produce such and such an effect.

Aranyakas are ‘Forest Books’ composed by those who had renounced the ritualistic sacrifices at home and gone to forests to live in favour of meditation. They focus on internalization of sacrifice enabling one to develop one’s ascetic practices. Some of them also contain mystical and philosophical speculations. Such portions are called Upanishads.

Upanishads: are philosophical and the mystical utterances secretly given by a guru to the disciple who sat (sad) down (ni) near (upa) to him, enabling him to experience the human self (atman) as Brahman, the Supreme Being. They came to be regarded as the core of the Vedas, and so were called the ‘Vedanta’ (the end of Vedas). The philosophy taught in the Upanishads is also called Vedanta.

The early religious quest directed to the outer world resulted in the varied gods in the Samhitas. They themselves were reduced to One Brahman (Supreme Being) in the Brhmanas. But what is Brahman was the central question of the Upanishads. Meanwhile the Aranyakas attempted to reassess the ritualism of Brahmanas. Now the Upanishads take this up with full vigour, redefining the law of karma. The karma is no more restricted to ritual action nor directed to appease the outer power pervading the universe. But it is extended to every action of life and is directed to an inward journey to realize one’s self, the Atman. But what is still more significant is the discovery by the still later Upanishads that ‘that Brahman is this Atman’ (*tat tvam asi*). These ideas would have enormous impact upon the later religious thought of Hinduism.

The Smriti Scriptures

The term ‘Smriti’ literally means “that which was remembered”, and so it refers to tradition. Therefore, they have only secondary authority, in so far as they are in accordance with the Vedas. They include:

- i) The two Itihisas or Epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata)
- ii) The Puranas (sacred chronicles with lot of legendary romances)
- iii) The Dharma Shastras (codes of law)
- iv) The Darshanas (philosophical schools)
- v) Agamas (manuals of worship).

Itihisas: While the Vedas are for the learned, the two Epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) are considered to be scriptures for the common people. **Ramayana** is centered on the one theme of depicting the noblest of human beings in and through a concrete exemplar of King Ram.

Mahabharata is the longest poem in the world, consisting of over 70,000 stanzas. It is a rich encyclopaedia of popular devotions couched through numerous stories and mini-stories, woven around the central narrative on the war of succession between two branches of a royal family.

Bhagavad Gita: Though it forms a part of Mahabharata, it is essentially complete in itself. For all religious purposes it has been regarded as a separate scripture of Hinduism. In fact it has been the most influential of scriptures in Hinduism.

It is given as a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Just before the outbreak of the Mahabharata war, Arjuna is perplexed by the consequences of killing his own kith and kin in the war. Krishna persuades him to overcome his reluctance. Briefly put, the ethical point is that as a warrior he has the duty to fight to fulfil dharma, unaffected by desire or regardless of its results to him and in faithfulness to God. Ritual action and knowledge are set forth as legitimate and mutually reinforcing paths, but incomplete unless integrated within and subordinated to bhakti. In the course of the teaching, a theistic form of religion is presented incorporating the ideas of other traditions like the Yoga, and answering to the stance of other religions like Buddhism.

Religions of Indian Origin

Puranas are chronicles of gods, heroes, sages and kings, full of legendary stories, wild exaggerations. The thrust of them all is to popularize the highly abstract thoughts of Hinduism in a concrete way, to explain to the masses the Hindu way of life, the Hindu ideals and to educate them on the Hindu philosophy of life. The Vedic gods are replaced by new Trimurthi gods and their consorts and offspring.

Dharma Shastras are the collection of various laws pertaining to regulation of political, religious, and social aspects of Hindu life. There arose separate manuals for each of the goals, each developing it with a lot of technical interpretations. Thus the Arthashastras by Kautilya dealt with pursuit of material property and power (artha). The Kamasutras of Vatsyaya elaborated the goal of love or desire (kama). Manu Smriti treated the laws belonging to the different castes (dharma). And the goal of moksha was developed by the six Darshanas.

Darshanas are the philosophical systems to elaborate the Upanishadic ideal of Moksha which was summarized in mnemonic formulae, called **Vedanta Sutra**. As such they required the use of commentaries for understanding them. In fact all the six schools of Indian philosophy are commentaries on the Vedanta Sutras which they took as authoritative. The first four of them, though claim loyalty to the Vedas, are quite independent of it. But the last two are primarily rooted in Vedanta sutra and hence are called Vedanta schools. (You have already learnt about them early in 1.1)

Agamas deal with worship forms, the temple-structure, etc. There are three classes of Agmas in relation to the three major sects of Hinduism. The Pancharatra Agamas are the Vishnava scriptures that glorify God as Vishnu. The Saiva Agamas glorify God as Shiva and have given rise to special school of Philosophy Saiva Siddhanta. The Shakta Agmas are the Tantras that glorify Goddess cult.

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) Distinguish between the Hindu scriptures called Sruti and Smriti.
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- 2) Why is Bhagavat Gita regarded as the most influential scripture of Hinduism?
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1.3 GOD AND HUMAN SALVATION

By the time of Puranas, the Aryans had been conquering not only the many local kingdoms but also been absorbing their deities into their religious framework. But this assimilation of gods did not take place simply haphazardly, but with certain underlying principles, and with practical implication for salvation. Our concern in this part of the lesson will be to describe the process of doctrinal tolerance about God, enunciate the principles underlying that process, and to explain its implication for salvation.

Process of Assimilation of gods

Already the Aryan communities came also with their own gods as the Rig Veda in one place mentions thirty three gods, in another place it declares that ‘three hundred and three thousand thirty nine gods worship Agni’. Over and above it, each of the diverse racial groups that existed across the Subcontinent had its own gods or goddesses, its own rites and ceremonies and its own ways of obtaining salvation. And as they went on conquering the local kingdom they also absorbed their gods too. But the whole process was taking place in some systematic way so that eventually it gave rise to the doctrine of the Hindu trinity (Trimurthi): Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

- The Upanishadic discovery of the all-pervading sacred power of the cosmos as the impersonal immanent reality of Brahman, is now relegated to the background and is represented as a personal god as Brhama, with human qualities, having creation as his main function.
- Vishnu, a minor god of Vedas, is now syncretised with various existing deities, with a totally new identity as a benevolent god, concerned for the welfare of the world. He is said to periodically descend into the world. Ten such descents (avatars) described: first as a **Fish** in order to deliver the Vedas from the demons, next **Tortoise** to sustain the world on its back, then as a **Boar** to raise the earth when it was dragged by a demon, then as a **Man-Lion** to put down the pride of demonic man, then as a **Dwarf** to put down the self-conceit of even a benevolent man. **Parasuraman** to destroy the militant and arrogant Kshatriyas. The ideal king and noblest of human beings is represented in the form of **Rama** by Ramayana. The importance of **Krishna** is brought out in Mahabharata, combining his pastoral eroticism, military exploits, and a dying god. Then **Buddha** is also seen as the incarnation of Vishnu, probably with a view to adopting it into Hinduism. The final one is yet to be expected.
- Shiva, originally a pre-Aryan god of South India, now identified by the Puranas with the Vedic god Rudra, is depicted as a fiercer figure, symbolizing both the creative and destructive aspects of deity. The creative aspect is seen in the chief symbol of lingam and as lord of dance (exuberant mode of self expression). as loving, as grace-bestowing, as a great ascetic, meditating on the Himalayan Mount, Kailash, as fearsome destroyer of evil, as one who frequents cremation grounds and other frightening places, as the Lord of beasts.

Another remarkable development is that the divine energy of the threefold gods was also seen as distinct female deity. Thus Goddess-worship also emerged, representing each member of Trimurthi with a consort:

- Brahma's consort was Saraswati, differently called Sarada (giver of essence, Vagishvari (mistress of speech) Brahmi (wife of Brahma) Mahavidya (supreme Knowledge), Lakshmi of Vishnu, and Parvati of Shiva. Each one having numerous names too.

Religions of Indian Origin

- Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu, variously called Sri, Padma or Kamala, Rukmini, Haripriya, Jaladhija, Lokamata
- Shiva's consort was Parvati, variedly called Uma, Ambika, Haimavati, Gauri, Girija, Daksayani, Mrdani, Rudrani, Sarvani, Aparna, Maheswari, Kumari, Varahi, Indrani, Chamundeswari.

Eventually the 'Divine Power' the Shakti was personified as Goddess as such. It was even recognized as primal matter embodied in the universe yet beyond it, enabling the role of the trimurti yet higher than the gods, causing the joys and miseries of this world and also liberation from it.

The Underlying Principles

There are three characteristically Hindu principles underlying the assimilation process that went on for centuries in Hinduism and that gave the doctrinal tolerance about God:

'Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti': The bewildering diversity of gods and goddesses did not confuse the Hindu mind, nor was the hesitation to assimilate them all as true. For, there was a profound insight of the sages that "Reality is one but the wise speak of it in different ways". It was with this insight only that the Hindu mind was able to accommodate the varied local deities its framework. Without losing its own original spiritual intuition it was able to assimilate the conflicting ideas or clashing interests of local communities, and their confusing details of customs, rites and ceremonies into a unified whole.

The principle of **adhikara** says that spiritual fitness or competence is varied from person to person. Thus the abstract notion of God as a Spirit both immanent and transcendent will be no good to a person whose mind hungers for concrete gods and therefore who does not have spiritual competence to imbibe it.

The third principle of **istadevata** says that out of the numerous forms of God conceived in the past, and recorded in the scriptures, no one is forced to select a particular god and worship him in a particular way. Everyone is free to choose one's own god or goddess which satisfies one's spiritual longing; one is also free to choose the pattern of worship. The main concern of Hinduism is not about how many gods there are or what kind of dogma or worship-pattern one must follow. Rather it is only concerned about whether the god or goddess you have chosen is helpful in your search for meaning in life.

Hindu Idea of Salvation

Corresponding to the doctrinal tolerance about God (we have explained just above), Hinduism proposes a doctrinal tolerance about salvation too. Each one can follow any god and any path of salvation. The principal paths to salvation are three: Jnana Marga, Karma marga and Bhakti marga.

Jnana Marga grants that anyone may use any image of God, even a gross and concrete form of God. But it insists that one gradually grows from material images to mental images and from the various mental images to the one personal Ishvara and from the personal Ishvara to the impersonal Absolute. Further, as against the meaning of karma by the Branhmanas 'the right performance of the sacrifice' Upanishads used the word karma to mean any action of life, having the potency to determine one's

future. The evil action will attain an evil womb while the good action a good womb. This process is repeated and thus the soul is subject to perpetual bondage or ‘samsara’ (‘sam’ meaning together, ‘sar’ meaning flow) or the endless cycle of births and rebirths, the conditions of each birth being determined by the acts (karma) performed during the previous life. Thus, since action only leads to further action and hence it alone cannot lead you to the release from this bondage (moksha), the Upanishads upheld that the only means of escape from samsara is the attainment of knowledge (jnana) of Brahman and experiencing the self as one with Brhman. That Realization or the Knowledge is precisely the Attainment of salvation. The realization of the Absolute itself may be either an ‘all-excluding Absolute’ or as ‘all-inclusive Absolute’.

- The idea of the all-excluding Absolute is there when the self (atman) identified with Brahman is seen as not having any attributes and is described by negatives *neti, neti* (not this, not this). One is said to be in ‘*avidya*’ if one regards the name and form (*nama-rupa*) of things as real and gets attached to them.
- The idea of all-comprehensive Absolute is there means that Brahman-atman penetrates the world so much that all names and forms are seen merely as modifications of the One. *Avidya* here means the failure to experience one’s immediacy with the That (*Tat tvam asi*).

Karmayoga insists on action (*karman*). In both Vedic and Mimasaka senses the *karman* meant *yajna* or a ritual action, performed with a view to getting one’s personal desire. However, in the sense proposed by Gita the action meant performing of one’s duty without any personal desire, but simply as in a sacrifice to the benefit of the world and by surrendering all actions to God. In this sense, for a soldier, even killing, done in the war, without any personal desire, to the benefit of the world, may be meritorious.

Bhakti marga, on the contrary, sees ritual action and knowledge as legitimate and mutually reinforcing means, but incomplete unless subordinated to *bhakti* and integrated with it. Action needs to be done unaffected by desire or regardless of its results to him and in faithfulness to God. The knowledge of God in the sense of experiencing the identity of *atman* with Brahman is impossible unless it is coupled with *bhakti*. Thus, *bhakti* is not so much as a path to salvation as salvation itself.

Thus, these are paths of salvation recognized. What suits one will have to be decided by each and adopt it and attain salvation.

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) State the key principles underlying the Hindu reconciling the diversity of gods and goddess with unity

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2) How does *Bhakti* precede over *Jnana* and *Karma* in obtaining one's salvation?

1.4 HINDU ETHICS

The human personality in Hinduism is seen as complex entity with fourfold aspects:

- The natural instinctive desires
- The craving for property and power
- The social relationship
- The spiritual urge.

Accordingly, a fourfold goal of human life is set for the integrated personality:

- Aesthetically beautiful expression of one's natural desires (*kama*)
- Lawfully acceptable acquisition of material prosperity and power (*artha*)
- Socially appropriate organization of duties (*dharma*)
- Spiritual pursuit of one's own attainment (*moksha*).

These fourfold ends of human life are called the Purushartas (literally, meaning to the human) and form the basis of the Hindu ethical teachings. They are usually put in a single formula: “*Dharma- artha- kama-Moksha*” which sums up the whole of ethical teachings of a Hindu life. The Righteousness (*dharma*) of life consists in directing our passions (*kama*) and possessions (*artha*) to a spiritual end (*moksha*).

Apart from this general morality implied in the formula, mentioned above, Hinduism had already produced during the time of its classical synthesis a terse formula of what it called **Varnashrama Dharma** having implications for one's personal ethics and social ethics. The one part of the cryptic formula, viz. **Ashrama dharma** defines the personal ethics of a Hindu life while the other part of it '**Varna dharma**' defines the Hindu social ethics.

The personal ethics of an individual is organized into four stages (ashramas)

The student's phase (Brahmacharya) demands one to learn one of the Vedas. It starts with the rite of initiation. After it, one is expected to apply oneself diligently to one's studies, to live celibate life and to honour one's teachers as one would one's parents. At the end of one's career as a student one is given a ceremonial bath to signify one's competence to assume the responsibilities of the householder.

The Housholder's life (Grahasta) requires him to perform domestic rituals of the Brahmanas to get his desired benefits. It starts with marriage and is governed by the caste restrictions. What is basically emphasized is the sacredness of marriage, and a perfect union of husband and wife in all respects (biological, psychological, moral and spiritual), loyal devotion to each other until death. The householder must not be

absorbed merely by the day to day affairs, cares and concerns of life. On the contrary he has to look upon his home as a trust which has come down to him from his forefathers and which he has to carry forward to posterity. This spiritual continuity is symbolically expressed by the sacred fire which is kept burning in the house. Further he is enjoined with five-fold duties:

- An offering to gods (e.g. a stick to the sacred fire) - to express his dependence on God
- Daily offering of waters to the forefathers, remembering his past
- Offerings to men (as a sign of his hospitality)
- Offering food to other beings (to share his possessions to the needy)
- Daily recitation of the Vedas (as a source of inspiration and of spiritual nourishment)

The Forest dweller's life (Vanaprastha) entails him to follow the teachings of the Aranyakas, internalizing the sacrificial rites. It starts when the householder, after living a full and fruitful life, throws off his family ties and withdraws from active life and other active role of leadership in his family, and devotes himself to the study of scriptures and religious practices.

The life of renouncer (the Sanyasi) necessitates him to live life of complete renunciation and solitude with the only aim of realization of spiritual freedom or mystic union with the divine, by cutting oneself of all "I" and "mine".

The Social ethics of Hindus was summed up in the *varna dharma*. The Hindu society is divided into four main classes:

- Brhamana (the priestly & teaching class)
- Kshatriya (the warrior and ruling class)
- Vaisya (the agricultural and commercial class)
- Sudra (the serving and labourers' class)

The major castes are four: the Brahmins or the priestly or teaching class. The Kshatriyas or the warriors or ruling class, the Vaisyas or the traders and agricultural class the Sudras the labourer's class service sector of society. These divisions normally regulate diet, clothing, religious practices, marriage and occupation.

The first three castes undergo initiation and thus become 'dwija' (twice born). Apart from the four there is what is called the outcaste - the 'avarna', originated back in the times when certain groups were barred on purely magic-ritualistic grounds from participating in the communal rituals, condemned to suffer all legal, social and religious disabilities to which a low caste Hindu is normally subjected and at the same time they are denied the few advantages which would have accrued to them in their regular caste system.

The most complete and detailed picture of this social pattern with its ramifications was formulated by Manushasthras written about 2nd century BCE. Today it is impossible to accept them as valid norms of the changed life pattern of society. The cause of caste system must have been either that the pre-Aryan communities had certain distinctive concepts of taboo, pollution and purification expressed in their religious rites or that the invading Aryans must have organised their social life mainly on certain magic-ritualistic concepts, the impact of which on the pattern of life of the indigenous

Indian communities must have helped the growth of castes on the basis of graded functional guilds protecting the occupations of the members of their society. However, it has been degenerated at a particular point of time so as to encourage discriminations of people by birth. This is totally unjustifiable. Realizing this, many leaders like Mahatma Gandhi have clearly denounced it as a ‘blot’ on Hinduism, an ‘abscess’ to be cut and thrown, poisonous virus to be eliminated. The Constitution of India itself has affirmed that State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.” It also affirms that “Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden”. With proper education and cultivation of heart, and due economic uplift the discrimination of people on the basis of caste is bound to be erased. Already during these years one can see a lot of improvement.

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) Enunciate the general principle of Hindu ethics
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- 2) What is Hindu social ethics? Discuss its relevance to the present day context.
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1.5 LET US SUM UP

The unique feature of Hindu religion is its ability to accommodate with and even to assimilate the plurality of beliefs and practices without being merged with any of them. In the context of its encounter with diversity of cultures and religions, Hinduism has organically developed its self-identity.

The Vedas for a Hindu are sacred scriptures of primary importance, because they contribute to the attainment of the goal of human life. Additionally one also regards other literary collections that recount either the actual or mythological cases of attainment, or those writings while accepting the authority of the Veda offer philosophic, ritualistic or prescriptive explanation regarding the exemplars of attainment.

The Hindu idea of God is accommodative with any number of conceptions, as expression of the one all-pervading sacred power. This ultimate principle of the universe is seen to be identical with the transcendental dimension of human existence. Our

human consciousness is tainted by a veil of ignorance such that we are not able to perceive this deeper dimension or the ultimate state of Being, Consciousness and Bliss. Hence, the real goal of life consists in attainment of that ultimate state of being. Whatever idea of God one finds suitable to realize that goal or whatever path one finds beneficial is accepted provided that one reaches the ultimate goal of life.

The ethical teachings of Hinduism have been graded according to the graded phases of one’s personal life or the graded structures of society. In the course of its long history many aberrations have come about. But the attempts to set them right have come about not so much from the central authority of power or hierarchy as from illustrious lives of saints and sages. The authority itself understood only in terms of internal competence for self-realization and not by the external power of any sort.

1.6 KEY WORDS

- Dharma** : The term ‘dharma’ (Sanskrit: *dharma*, Pa?i *dhmma*), is an Indian spiritual and religious term, that means one’s righteous duty or any virtuous path. It literally translates as *that which upholds or supports*. In Indian languages it contextually implies one’s religion. **Dogma**: Dogma is the established belief or doctrine held by a religion, ideology or any kind of organization: it is authoritative and not to be disputed, doubted or diverged from.
- Ritualism** : Ritualism refers to an overemphasis on the rituals and liturgical ceremonies of a religion.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) The Hindu scriptures are distinguished between two classes of its literature: *Shruti*, meaning “what is heard”, or the divinely revealed truths, pre-existent and self-existent. The seers who had the extraordinary insight to perceive those eternal truths grasped them and transmitted to the posterities orally for many centuries. *Apurusheya*, not of personal authorship and so having no human imperfection; as such they had the primary authority and importance.

Smrti literally means ‘what is remembered. Actually it refers to tradition. All the scriptures under this category proclaimed the authority of the Vedas. Having done that their function was just to clarify the obscurities, if any, of the Veda or to explain through illustrations either through historical or mythological (Epics), or through unbelievable stories (Puranas), or through argumentation (Darsanas) or through prescriptive literature (Dharma shastras). The claim that *smrti* texts need not contradict the Veda left their authors with great freedom in pursuing new formulations.

- 2) Though Gita forms a part of Mahabharata, it is essentially complete in itself. For all religious purposes it has been regarded as a separate scripture of Hinduism. In fact it has been the most influential of scriptures in Hinduism. Though its teachings seem to be ethical in its import it is theistic in its approach. It enjoins the warrior who has the duty to fight to fulfil dharma, unaffected by desire or regardless of its results to him and in faithfulness to God. Ritual action and knowledge are set forth as legitimate and mutually reinforcing paths, but incomplete unless integrated within and subordinated to *bhakti*. Thus it reconciles the three ways of salvation into one synthesis incorporating the ideas of other traditions like the Yoga. At the same time it answers the stance of other religions like Buddhism. Above all, it is a path open to all classes of people, not merely to the people of higher castes.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The first principle ‘Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti’ (Reality is one but the wise speak of it in different ways) helped people to accommodate the conflicting ideas of local deities into unity. Secondly, the principle of **Adhikara** that spiritual fitness or competence is varied from person to person enabled varied people to take to varied concepts of god suitable to their own temperament and competence. Thirdly, the principle of **istadevata** gives the right to choose one’s own god or goddess which satisfies one’s spiritual longing and, out of the numerous forms of God conceived in the past, and recorded in the scriptures. One is also free to select the pattern of worship
- 2) Action, if it is not to lead to further action, needs to be done unaffected by desire or regardless of its results to oneself, but only to the benefit of the world, and in faithfulness to God. This is precisely the meaning of *bhakti*. Likewise, the knowledge of God in the sense of experiencing the identity of *atman* with Brahman is impossible unless it is coupled with *bhakti*. Thus, *bhakti* takes precedence to action and knowledge. *Bhakti* is not so much as a path to salvation as salvation itself.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

Hinduism

- 1) The general principle which sums up the whole of ethical teachings of a Hindu life is the one that enunciates the fourfold end of human life pertaining to the pursuit of material, psychological, moral and spiritual “*Dharma- artha- kama- Moksha.*” The Righteousness (*dharma*) of life consists in directing our passions (*kama*) and possessions (*artha*) to a spiritual end (*moksha*).
- 2) The Social ethics of Hindus is represented by Varna dharma. The Hindu society is divided into four main classes: Brhamana (the priestly and teaching class), Kshatriya (the warrior and ruling class), Vaisya (the agricultural and commercial class) and Sudra (the serving and labourers’ class. Whatever be the historical role the Varna dharma played, it cannot be encouraged today. Keeping the overall framework of categorization of society according to various professions, the discrimination between people on the basis of birth must be rooted out.