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Module Structure

In a country like India, it is no hidden fact that religion is one of the major pillars for the society to exist. The purpose of the module is to explore this domain in context of India. This shall be done through one of the basic tenets of religion - ‘rituals’. Ritual and worship lie at the core of religion. Different sections of the module thus cater to different aspects of rituals. This includes Section I which can be seen as an introductory note for the entire discussion. Section II looks at rituals in terms of ‘life-cycle rituals’ (rites of passage). Section III then explores the existence of sects and cults in case of India. Section IV is an attempt to look at the performative aspect of religion through caste and gender. The concluding section of the module thus gives a glimpse of the syncretic nature prevalent in the country through rituals. Each section is substantiated with lucid case studies that may enhance the understanding of basic concepts and ideas.

Description of the Module

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<td>Subject Name</td>
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<td>Paper Name</td>
<td>Religion and Society</td>
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<td>Ritual and Worship in India</td>
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<td>Pre Requisites</td>
<td>An understanding of religion and the rituals associated especially in context of India.</td>
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<td>Objectives</td>
<td>To develop and enrich the basic understanding of various rituals associated with religion. Emphasis is on the Indian context to understand the existence of a diverse set of rituals and the meanings within. Rituals will also be studies as a site for performing various identities and maintaining the social structure.</td>
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<td>Ritual, Worship, Religion, Sects, Cults, Rites of passage, Syncretism</td>
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**Religion and Society**

**Module 14: Ritual and Worship in India**

In a country like India, it is no hidden fact that religion is one of the major pillars for the society to exist. The way religion is constructed affects people’s lives in several ways. It also affects how they present their worship and devotion to themselves as well as to others. Ritual and worship lie at the core of religion. Worship can be seen as a response to a belief. Ritual and worship thus becomes a key to understand religion and the meanings as a symbolic system (Geertz 1973). The following module deals with this very aspect of religion. The first section shall introduce what rituals mean in sociological terms and their existence within society. This shall be followed by their visibility in the forms of life cycle rituals. Differences in rituals shall be seen through an understanding of sects and cults in the succeeding section. Finally, two central aspects where rituals play out themselves on a regular basis shall be discussed namely; i.) caste and ii.) women. This shall be done with some particular case studies. The module ends with a thought provoking discussion on the reformist idea of religion and rituals.
1. Meaning of Rituals

Emile Durkheim in his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), argued that every religious group had three features: a system of beliefs that express the sacred and define the sacred and profane; a moral community, such as a clan, tribe, sect, synagogue, masjid, church, etc. that develops in concert with these beliefs and enforces the norms and rules of the believing society; and a set of collective behaviours, rituals. Rituals thus provide a focal point for emotional processes and generate symbols of group membership. Along with integration of society, these were important to provide a structure to the society. The theoretical works of Weber and Durkheim were in some way pioneering to substantiate the significance of religious rituals. Evelyn Underhill defined ritual in her work ‘Worship’ as “an agreed pattern of ceremonial movements, sounds and verbal formulas creating a framework within which corporate religious action can take place” (1937: 32).

In general symbol can be seen as something that has power beyond its literal meaning as it expresses more than it indicates. The religious symbol thus is a thing of power. Parsons writing of religious ritual assures us that it “effects a reassertion and fortification of the sentiments on which social solidarity depends” (1937: 434). For Victor turner, ritual is “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to belief in mystical beings or powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual” (1967: 19). Anthony F.C. Wallace states, “ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool... it is the ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do” (1966: 102).

Ritual then involves a pattern of defined behaviour, externalising in a sensible form some religious emotion or idea. For any community worship there has to be some externalising of these sentiments through rituals for it to gain acceptance. The purpose of the ritual system can be seen as being manifold. In context of India, rituals for instance, in most cases, re-enacted the relation of Brahmans with other communities. These enabled the Brahmans to retain considerable domination as only they knew the correct formulations for the rituals. In sum, the ritual enabled the community to affirm its place in the socio-cosmic order. This can be seen through the following case:

- ‘Urs Rituals’

‘Urs includes rituals surrounding the death anniversary of a Muslim saint or pir. The house of the pir is decorated and rich food is cooked. The scene is like that os a wedding (urs means marriage) (Green, 2010). Sufi musical performances, professional praise singers are a daily ritual. The climax of the ritual is the ‘sandalmali’ or sandalwood rubbing which takes place at the saint’s mausoleum that gets ritually transformed into his wedding chamber. The space is soon filled with all married men gathered there. The central act of the ritual is uncovering of the cenotaph that marks the saint’s tomb and symbolically marks both the marriage bed and the bride herself. As each layer is uncovered from the cenotaph (red, green, yellow; colours of a wedding), the atmosphere gets intense for it marks the symbolic unveiling of the bride. The last colour remaining is white marking the shroud of death and burial in islam; symbolising the mortuary ritual too. The sandalwood is now rubbed on the tomb marking towards the consummation of the wedding as complete. Qawwals immediately strike up songs. New cloths offered by the devotees are placed on the cenotaph.

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1 urs literally means marriage. The occasion celebrates the re-union of the saint with God at death.
Emile Durkheim (1965) proposed a relationship between ritual behaviour and the adherence to social order, putting collective worship of the sacred at the heart of his theory of social solidarity. Ritual, organized around sacred objects as its focal point and organized into cultic practice, was for Durkheim the fundamental source of the “collective conscience” that provides individuals with meaning and binds them into a community. Participation in rites integrates the individual into a social order both in one’s “day-to-day relationships of life” and in those celebrations of the collective. According to Durkheim, the idea of “strictness” associated with the rituals was an attempt to preserve society. The ritual act transforms the uncontrollable events into a more organised community life. With this idea of ritual in Indian context, it is important to see how these rituals help an individual in creating and reaffirming identity at different stages of life.

2. Rites of Passage: the life-cycle rituals

The rites of passage can be seen as crucial markers of different stages of one’s life including birth, puberty, marriage or death. It was in his French work Les rites de Passage, that was later published in English (1960) that Arnold van Gennep discussed these rites as being universal to all societies. A tripartite arrangement can be seen in terms of these rites of passage. This is: separation, transition and incorporation. Van Gennep noted that a person had to be separated from one role or status before he or she could be incorporated into a new one. There might exist vast differences amongst these rites in terms of their forms, how they are carried out, the intensity, the meaning that they may carry; yet, the ceremonial aspect remains present across societies which then marks the passage or transition of an individual or a group from one social status or situation to another. Rites of passage resolve life-crisis; they provide a mechanism to deal with the tension experienced by both individuals and social groups during transitory occasions including, but not limited to, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Victor Turner has taken this work forward by elaborating the idea of liminality. He extended the term far beyond its original sense of an intermediate or marginal ritual phase and has taken on new meaning as an autonomous and sometimes enduring category of people who are "betwixt and between." Rituals are for Turner always associated with rites of passage that mark a transition from one status state to another. In anthropological sense, it is a more conventional idea that these life-cycle rituals are primary evidence of the socio-psychological or socioeconomic function of religion. Such rites of passage are very well seen in context of India too and can be understood in a clearer manner through certain cases:

The simple initiation ceremony, the upanayana ceremony (wearing of sacred thread) was a prototype of other kinds of initiation too. It marked the beginning of Brahmacharya ashrama and is regarded as the second birth for a Hindu boy. This was invoking within the person the consciousness of responsibilities. This is the samskara\(^2\) or the rites of passage in a Hindu man’s life described in ancient Sanskrit texts, as well as a concept in the karma theory of Indian philosophies. These begin with one's birth, celebrates certain early steps in a baby's growth and, then various stages of life or the ashramas. Samskaras are not considered as end in themselves, but are means of social recognition as well as the passage of a person from one significant stage of life to another.

Among Muslims, when a baby is born, the Muslim call to prayer, known as the Adhan, ("God is great, there is no God but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Come to prayer.") is recited into

\(^2\) Samskara is a scared ceremony denoting different rites of passage in the Indian philosophy.
the baby's right ear by the father. The baby is given a taste of something sweet, so parents may chew a piece of date and rub the juice along the baby's gums. After seven days the Aqeeqah ceremony is performed in which the baby's scalp is shaved of hair. This is to show that the child is the servant of Allah. During the Indian Navjote ceremony, the ritual rite of passage where the person is accepted into the Parsi community, a priest ties a sacred thread around the child's waist as he or she chants the Ahuna-Vairya (ancient prayers).

According to Visvanathan, myths can be seen as the domain to understand Eucharistic rituals. Rituals become the mode of enactment of important aspects of Christ's life. The Eucharist is the central motif of Christian ritual life. The rites of passage of the Christian calendar; the birth, baptism, works, death and resurrection of Christ can all be seen through them. The Eucharist, or the experiencing of the bread and wine as body and blood for instance, is a feast representing the body and blood of Christ. Thus, what the bread and wine becomes to the physical body, Christ becomes to the spirit (Visvanathan, 2004).

Pregnancy and childbirth are often associated with rites of separation; pregnant women may be viewed as dangerous, or capable of polluting men and sacred objects and places (Douglas 1966). Commenting on birthing rites, van Gennep cites at length W. H. R. Rivers's 1906 ethnography of the Tonga of India. Among these people a series of pregnancy rites are performed, first to separate the pregnant woman from her village. After an extended liminal period, a ceremony is held in which the woman drinks sacred milk to purify her, her husband, and their child. Subsequently, the family is reintegrated into their social group. No longer a polluting women, she is re-established in her village as a mother. By facilitating these life course transitions, rites of passage hold considerable emotional importance for both the individual and society. To take on a new social identity, the former must negotiate an often-arduous status passage.

These rites of passage differ from society to society and from one religious strand to another. Moreover, in a country like India, religions are not restricted to the larger ones but also extend to various strands and communities in the form of sects and cults. The following section shall discuss the existence of such formations and the role of rituals therein.

3. Sects and Cults: Strands in Religion

Sects and cults have a strong presence in the domain of religion in context of India. While church in the western context is a large well established religious body- like the Catholic Church or the Church of England; sect is a smaller, less highly organized grouping of committed believers. Sects are also comparatively smaller and aim at discovering and following ‘the true way’ and tend to withdraw from surrounding society into communities of their own. Cults resemble sects but have different emphases. Weber and Troeltsch (1912) elaborated the church-sect typology. According to them, sect is a newly formed religious group that includes protest elements of their parent religion. Thus sect can be seen as an offshoot from a religion. According to Wallis, “sects lay a claim to possess unique and privileged access to the truth or salvation and “their committed adherents typically regard all those outside the confines of the collectivity as ‘in error’” (1976). He contrasts this with a cult that he described as characterized by “epistemological individualism” by which he means that “the cult has no clear locus of final authority beyond the individual member.” (1975: 91). This can be better understood by certain examples.
For instance, in Indian religions, the church as a central organisation has not existed. Even if it does, it cannot be compared to the Roman Catholic Church. The Buddhist Sangha which also made a mark on the life of Thervada countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos etc. has come close to the Christian church but still its organisational pattern is simple; the level of centralisation is low, the structure is not monolithic but pluralistic. The reformist sects have remained anchored to the mainstream religion. The exceptions to this were the Sikhs and the Lingayats or Veerashaivas (Karnataka). The lingayats asserted themselves against the Brahmans and Jainas who held high status as well as political power. Vaishnavism, shaivism and saktism, based on the divinities of Vishnu, shiva and Shakti are seen as emerging from Hinduism. Thus we see the emergence of sects from a main religion as a result of certain disgruntlement with the religion per se.

The main idea behind the Indian reformist sects like kabirpanthis, chaitanyites and dadupanthhis was of inclusivity rather than exclusivity. The bhakti sects for instance, were not populist and provided a forum for the disadvantaged sections of the society. V. Subramanian’s work elaborates that bhakti sects made a positive contribution to political stability. Bhaktism not only brought the elites and masses together, but also stimulated regional integration. One can renounce one’s sect altogether by initiation into another sect. One of the important symbols of this ritual is a ‘kanthi’ (a string of tulsi beads). On a general level, all reformist sects aimed at equality and brotherhood, but in reality, disparities of status or rank were not entirely absent. The lingayats as a reformist group arose in the 12th century in Karnataka as an anti-caste movement. It integrated numerous groups into a monotheistic religion centred around the wearing of linga (a phallic symbol) on the body of all men, women and children. It abolished the various “pollutions” associated with birth, death, menstruation etc. it held that all those who worshipped shiva in the form of linga were equals and gained equal access to salvation.

Vishnuism has been very popular in the south where it gave rise to series of sub-sects too. Nearly all of them reject sacrifice and make personal devotion the basis of salvation. The ceremonial purity of food is stressed ritually. Even in vegetarian food for instance, vaishnavas shall have two categories of prescribed and prohibited food. For example, potatoes, onions, garlic and other roots are prohibited. This food cannot be offered to the deities. Shaktism flourished in north-east to a large extent. According to the major doctrine, passion can be destroyed and exhausted only by passion. Both eating certain kinds of non-vegetarian food and wine is encouraged here. Each sect empahsizes certain offering as ‘bhoga’ to the deity as a ritual. After the symbolic eating by the deity, the priest and the devout take the food and offer it as Prasad. While vegetarian food is a part of ritual for Krishna or Rama, the mother goddess is offered specific non-vegetarian food ritually.

4. Ritual, worship and other domains

- Case of Caste

Caste has been an important dimension of religion from the beginning. Certain groups of people are regarded as ‘untouchable’ and thus considered as ritually impure. In the classic study of caste, Homo Hierarchicus (1980), Dumont located Brahmans at top of the caste hierarchy due to their superior ritual purity. The lower one goes in the caste hierarchy, the greater is the impurity; with untouchables considered as being most polluting. The north-western village of Bisru of Mewat has been studied by Raymond Jamous (2003) in which he points towards the caste group, the Meos
(Muslim Rajput high status caste). The study of Meos shows that Brahmans were not the prime ritual specialists. Although Bisru Brahmans condemn Meos for their consumption of buffalo meat (relative ritual purity is given to vegetarian diet) and thus would not accept cooked food from them. Yet the Meos are respected for their high status as the dominant caste and some Brahmans might take tea from them. Interestingly, Meo women act as a kind of a gateway protecting the honour of the patriline into which they marry. A key ritual in which they maintain its continuity is kuan puja or worshipping the well. This is done at life cycle rituals that have been discussed above.

Brahminical Hinduism imposed restrictions on Dalit participation in religious life. They were denied access to classical religious traditions and scriptures. A Hindu temple at village Ranapada in Puri district of Orissa on June 25, 2011 refused entry for worship by P.L. Punia, the Chairman, National Commission for Scheduled Castes. The Commission is the national watchdog for safeguarding the dignity and interests of the 200 million Scheduled Castes. Undoubtedly he was ill-advised to go to the temple, thereby inviting indignity upon himself. By his misadventure the Chairman has subjected himself to untouchability and humiliation. Mahatma Gandhi had requested Dr. Ambedkar to lend his support to Dr Paramaribo Subbarayan in his Temple Entry Bill in 1934. Dr. Ambedkar declined to associate himself with a Bill which, without penal provision, was impracticable.

Exclusion from Hindu temples has been the most publicized, if not the most onerous, single aspect of untouchability. It was the area in which government had most readily intervened to support exclusionary practices. It was the area which most troubled reformers, publicists and politicians concerned with establishing or preserving Hindu unity. The Chaumukha Adinath temple of Ranakpur draws devotees from both Digambara and Shvetambara traditions of the Jains. Offerings of milk, water, sandalpaste, flowers, sweets are made by the lay people although rituals are conducted by the brahman priests only.

Ad Dharam was an anti-caste movement of the chamar dalits of the Doaba region launched during the 1920s and 1930s. The colonial rule had recognised them as a separate religious community. However, post-Independence they were included in the list of Hindu SCs. Over years, they moved closer to Sikhism. They have begun to follow Sikh rituals such as getting married through Anand Karaj (Jodhka, 2001). A large number of chuhras and chamars too converted to Sikh faith in order to distance themselves from brahmanical hindusim. A good number of religious functionaries of gurudwaras who take care of the holy book (called the granthis) come from dalit caste group. Through subtle messages here too, the upper caste Sikhs made their disapproval visible on this. For instance, their children were asked to come for the langar (food served at gurudwaras) after everyone had eaten. Dalits were often not informed about special festivities. Dalits have infact come up with their own resistance towards this by constructing separate places of worship. They have their own gurudwaras at some places.

It is thus simple to observe that high status people are treated with deference and servitude by the population at large. Service is a metaphor of offering civility and deference to authority, which many observers have noted about the relations between the castes in India.

- Case of Women

The role of women has always been central in context of religion and worship. They are part of pujas at domestic shrines to keeping vrats and so on. Women may also function as pujarini at non-
brahmanical public shrines (Vachani, 1990) as well as be a central figure in bhajan or Sikh shabds from the Guru Granth Sahib.

At the Sabarimala pilgrimage in Kerala, as pointed by Filippo and Osella, the participants (male) renew their masculinity as responsible householders by becoming temporary renouncers and identifying with both the male deity Ayyapaa during the forty-one days of the pilgrimage (2003). The role of women is overshadowed by men in the rituals here including the vrat of celibacy taken up by the men in order to achieve concrete ends including a male child etc.

Similarly, at the ceremony of the ‘urs (discussed above), the women are absent from crucial parts. Their role waits to be revalidated by the renewal of the community and the men. However, while he pilgrims at Ayyappa temporarily renounce sex, drink and meat eating to participate in their deity’s ascetically gained power, the men at the ‘urs bring their virility to the shrine. Their sexuality is contained by the authority of the elders to be used in future for procreation within the reconstituted community itself (Hirst and Zavos, 2011).

Temples and mosques practise discrimination routinely. In November, a Hindu temple in Maharashtra suspended seven security guards after a female devotee stepped on a platform to worship an idol. Women are barred from the platform and temple priests performed a “purification” ceremony to rid it of the “pollution” the woman had caused. Many Hindu temples prohibit women who have their period from entering. A 350-strong group of women from Bhumata Ranragini brigade was stopped by the police and the temple administration from entering the Shani Shingnapur temple in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra in recent times. The women were trying to break the allegedly 400-year-old tradition of the temple banning women from entering its inner sanctum.

Temple entry movements by marginalised sections have historically been used as a symbol of protest against exclusion and as a challenge to the established power hierarchies in society. Banning entry to temples is especially discriminatory since it subverts the idea of everyone being equal for God and thus movements to enter the house of God assume larger meaning. Mahatma Gandhi based a large part of his social justice movement for Dalits on temple entry. Vaikom Satyagraha was a movement to enable the Dalits to not just enter the temple but also use the roads leading to it and use of other spaces around the temple, previously reserved for the ‘upper castes’. EV Ramasami aka Periyar and Sree Narayana Guru also joined the Satyagraha and this paved the way for subsequent Temple Entry Act. Interestingly, women formed important part of this struggle as the movement spread.

5. Conclusion

Thus far we have noted a number of ways by which people express their religious orientations through ritual and performance. Ritual does many things at once. With their bodies and through their senses, people act out in ritual something of who they understand themselves to be. Sometimes the ritual attempts to reconstruct the rootedness of a community by instilling a sense of antiquity. Sometimes the ritual is a hybridization – mingling of folk and classical and of various regional and family “traditions.” Ritual selectively reappropriates and re-presents perceptions of the past even as it embodies elements of the present. Local spaces and shrines may be linked to pan-Hindu or classical ones. The seeming outward differences in quality and flavour are at the source, still the same.
By the 1820s, Christian missionaries were prominent in colonial India and were critical to indigenous religious practices. In this context, Rammohun Roy, often called the ‘renaissance man’ had an interesting position. He regarded the representation of Hindu traditions as polytheistic in contrast to the monotheism of Christianity as a very simplistic model leading to a western point of view of binaries of ‘east’ and ‘west’. For him Hindu traditions included notions of the divine that are strongly monotheistic. He himself rejected the image worship. The modern day Hinduism stands reformed by the role played by several leaders including Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and others. Ramkrishna for instance taught his disciples that the differences we see in religious practices are the result of the differences in the cultural background of the people. They are not the qualitative differences in religious insight. Festivals and pilgrimages often have a way of bringing Religion in Contemporary India together a diverse assortment of people, sometimes acting out distinct social identities, sometimes transcending them.

Several ideas related with religion are thus being re-articulated. Kabir panth for instance, has strongly opposed caste system. Kabir’s idea of personal devotion questioned a range of rituals and social constraints related to caste identity. The life and teachings of Kabir serve as an excellent example to illustrate change. Kabir was initiated in spiritualism by a Vaishnava guru, Ramananda, belonging to the South Indian Shri-Sampradaya sect. a distinctive fraternity of Kabir followers with the name of kabir panth was thus formed with time. It was about impersonal divine (nirguna bhakti), rejecting caste legitimacy, questioning authority of Brahmins etc.

Religious syncretism through rituals can be seen to be becoming quite dominant. For instance, in case of Jain worship, it may look very similar to Hindu or Buddhist puja, offerings at Sufi shrines or in some ways to Indian Christianity forms of worship. Yet such an assumption of total similarity can be quite problematic. For instance, after Dadaguru worship (former ascetics, now regarded as ascetics), a small proportion of offerings is taken outside the Jain temple. This might look like Hindu or Sikh prashad. However the gift is not there to transfer any sin from the worshipper to the priest like in a Hindu ritual (Raheja, 1988). Here the idea is of destruction of karma, not transfer (Flugel, 1998). Thus the similarly performed ritual might have very different meanings.

Douglas infact emphasizes the existence of religion only because of the presence of the externals: ‘rituals’. For, according to Douglas, we need in our lives what she refers to as framing. The need of rituals thus provides focus to our experience. What is more, without rituals certain types of experience would not be possible. Douglas points out how the days of the week create an experience of time that would not be possible if we did not have them. Not only do the days have their own particular characteristics for us, but also their meaning for us is partly a matter of their position in the sequence (Douglas, 1966). Thus Sunday is the day of rest for us, but it also has a significance relative to Monday. Douglas sees regular rituals generally as helping shape our experience of life.

The social forms of religious articulation and organisation have been historically different in India and in many other parts of the world, from that of Europe. The way rituals are performed can be seen in terms of performance of relationships within a family or a community. Thus, different sets including the priest, worshippers, devotees are all reflected in the process of worship and ritual. Ritual thus remains one of the most important concepts not just in the sociology of religion but in sociology more broadly.
Reference bibliography:


