1. Explain the significance of life-cycle rituals of birth, marriage and death.

Ans: A detailed series of life-cycle rituals (samskara, or refinements) mark major transitions in the life of the individual. Especially orthodox Hindu families may invite Brahman priests to their homes to officiate at these rituals, complete with sacred fire and recitations of mantras. Most of these rituals, however, do not occur in the presence of such priests, and among many groups who do not revere the Vedas or respect Brahmans, there may be other officiants or variations in the rites.

Ceremonies may be performed during pregnancy to ensure the health of the mother and growing child. The father may part the hair of the mother three times upward from the front to the back, to assure the ripening of the embryo. Charms may serve to ward off the evil eye and witches or demons. At birth, before the umbilical cord is severed, the father may touch the baby's lips with a gold spoon or ring dipped in honey, curds, and ghee. The word vak (speech) is whispered three times into the right ear, and mantras are chanted to ensure a long life. A number of rituals for the infant include the first visit outside to a temple, the first feeding with solid food (usually cooked rice), an ear-piercing ceremony, and the first haircut (shaving the head) that often occurs at a temple or during a festival when the hair is offered to a deity.

A crucial event in the life of the orthodox, upper-caste Hindu male is an initiation (upanayana) ceremony, which takes place for some young males between the ages of six and twelve to mark the transition to awareness and adult religious responsibilities. At the ceremony itself, the family priest invests the boy with a sacred thread to be worn always over the left shoulder, and the parents instruct him in pronouncing the Gayatri Mantra. The initiation ceremony is seen as a new birth; those groups entitled to wear the sacred thread are called the twice-born (see Glossary). In the ancient categorization of society associated with the Vedas, only the three highest groups—Brahman, warrior (Kshatriya), and commoner or merchant (Vaishya)—were allowed to wear the thread, to make them distinct from the fourth group of servants (Shudra). Many individuals and groups who are only hazily associated with the old “twice-born” elites perform the upanayana ceremony and claim the higher status it bestows. For young Hindu women in South India, a different ritual and celebration occurs at the first menses.

The next important transition in life is marriage. For most people in India, the betrothal of the young couple and the exact date and time of the wedding are matters decided by the parents in consultation with astrologers. At Hindu weddings, the bride and bridgroom represent the god and the goddess, although there is a parallel tradition that sees the groom as a prince coming to wed his princess. The groom, decked in all his finery, often travels to the wedding site on a caparisoned white horse or in an open limousine, accompanied by a procession of relatives, musicians, and bearers of ornate electrified lamps. The actual ceremonies in many cases become extremely elaborate, but orthodox Hindu marriages typically have at their center the recitation of mantras by priests. In a crucial rite, the new couple take seven steps northward from a sacred household fire, turn, and make offerings into the flames. Independent traditions in regional languages and among different caste groups support wide variations in ritual (see Life Passages, ch. 5). After the death of a family member, the relatives become involved in ceremonies for preparation of the body and a procession to the burning or burial ground. For most Hindus, cremation is the ideal method for dealing with the dead, although many groups practice burial instead; infants are buried rather than cremated. At the funeral site, in the presence of the male mourners, the closest relative of the deceased (usually the eldest son) takes charge of the final rite and, if it is cremation, lights the funeral pyre. After a cremation, ashes and fragments of bone are collected and eventually immersed in a holy river. After a funeral, everyone undergoes a purifying bath. The immediate family remains in a state of intense pollution for a set number of days (sometimes ten, eleven, or thirteen). At the end of that period, close family members meet for a ceremonial meal and often give gifts to the poor or to charities. A particular feature of the Hindu ritual is the preparation of rice balls (pinda) offered to the spirit of the dead person during memorial services. In part these ceremonies are seen as contributing to the merit of the deceased, but they also purify the soul so that it will not linger in this world as a ghost but will pass through the realm of Yama, the god of death.

2. Discuss religious pluralism in the context of India.

Ans: Religious pluralism is a belief that one can overcome religious differences between different religions and conflicts within the same religion. For most religious traditions religious pluralism is based on a non-literal view of one’s religious traditions allowing for respect to be followed between different traditions on core principals rather than on marginal issues. It is an attitude which rejects focus on immaterial differences and instead gives respect to those beliefs held in common.

The existence of religious pluralism depends on the existence of freedom of religion which is when different religions of a particular region possess the same rights of worship and public expression. Freedom of religion is weakened when one religion is given rights or privileges and denied to others. Religious freedom did not exist in communist countries where the state restricted or prevented the public expression of religious belief and even persecuted the individual religions. In some Middle Eastern countries they where they adhere to one particular religion the pluralism is rather restricted if not totally curbed.

India is a multi-cultural and a diverse nation with a flourishing history of pluralism that has been thriving for thousands of years. Among the many faiths represented here are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. As the world’s largest democracy, India presents a unique opportunity to understand a long and multifaceted heritage of religious diversity. With this reality in mind, Columbia Global Centers | Mumbai hosted University Chaplain, Jewelnel Davis, and four Kraft Global Fellows from May 24-June 3 for an intensive field study on Religious Pluralism in India. Through visits to important sacred sites and exhibitions, and interactions with experts, the team learned about the history, practices and contemporary issues related to different religions in India and explored the relationship between religious communities.

The time spent in the capital city of New Delhi allowed the fellows to understand the importance of diversity as a founding principle of Indian democracy. From delving into the growth of ancient religions like Islam and Sufi culture, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism, as well as being introduced to the inception of the newer Baha’i faith in India, the fellows steadily acquainted themselves with the plural