Chapter 7: India's Cultural Roots

Questions — Questions, Activities and Projects

Q1 If you were Nachiketa, what questions would you like to ask Yama? Write them down in 100–150 words.

SOLUTION

This is a personal/imaginative question. Here is a model answer based on the Katha Upanishad story in the chapter.

If I were Nachiketa, standing before Yama, I would ask:

1. You said the atman is immortal and is neither born nor dies — does that mean the real 'me' never truly disappears?
2. If the self is the same in all creatures, why do we feel so separate from each other?
3. What happens to the good and bad actions (karma) a person does — do they shape who they become in the next life?
4. Is there a way to know the atman while still alive, or only after death?
5. How can a young person like me begin to seek this deeper knowledge in everyday life?

These questions reflect Nachiketa's courage and curiosity in seeking the truth about life, death, and the immortal self.

Answer: Model answer: Nachiketa would ask Yama about the nature of the immortal atman, whether karma shapes the next life, how the self relates to all creatures, and how a young person can seek this knowledge while still alive.

Q2 Explain a few central ideas of Buddhism. Briefly comment upon them.

SOLUTION

Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) attained enlightenment after meditating under a pipal tree at Bodh Gaya.

He taught that avidya (ignorance) and attachment are the root causes of human suffering.

He stressed ahimsa — non-hurting or non-violence — and sincere inner discipline.

He founded the Sangha, a community of monks (bhiksus) and nuns (bhiksunis) to spread his teachings.

These ideas are still relevant today: reducing attachment and cultivating inner discipline help people lead calmer, kinder lives.

Answer: Buddhism teaches that ignorance and attachment cause suffering, and that ahimsa (non-violence) and inner discipline are the path to enlightenment. The Buddha founded the Sangha to spread these values across India and Asia.

Q3 Discuss in class the quotation of the Buddha which begins with "Not by water is one made pure, though many people may bathe here [in sacred rivers]" to make sure that its meaning has been understood by all.

SOLUTION

The Buddha's saying means that external rituals — like bathing in a sacred river — cannot by themselves make a person truly pure.

True purity comes from within: it is about truth (satya) and dharma (right conduct) residing in one's heart and actions.

The second line — 'Conquering oneself is greater than conquering a thousand men on the battlefield' — reinforces this: overcoming one's own anger, greed, and ignorance is the greatest victory.

This is a class-discussion question. Students should share examples of how inner values matter more than outward appearances, and how self-discipline in daily life reflects this teaching.

Answer: The Buddha means that real purity is inner — it comes from truth and right conduct, not from external rituals like river-bathing. And self-conquest (controlling one's own mind) is the greatest form of strength.

Q4 Explain a few central ideas of Jainism. Briefly comment upon them.

SOLUTION

Jainism was preached by Mahavira ('great hero'), who achieved supreme wisdom after 12 years of ascetic discipline.

The word 'Jain' comes from jina, meaning 'conqueror' — not of enemies, but of ignorance and attachments.

Three key Jain teachings are: ahimsa (non-violence towards all living beings), anekantavada (truth has many aspects, not just one), and aparigraha (non-possession — limiting oneself to what is truly necessary).

Jainism also stresses the interconnectedness of all creatures, from humans to invisible organisms.

These ideas encourage respect for all life and humility about one's own understanding — values that remain meaningful today.

Answer: Jainism, founded by Mahavira, centres on ahimsa (non-violence to all beings), anekantavada (truth has many aspects), and aparigraha (non-possession). It also emphasises that all living beings are interconnected and depend on each other.

Q5 Consider and discuss in class André Béteille's thought (see page 122).

SOLUTION

André Béteille, an Indian sociologist, wrote: 'The thousands of castes and tribes on the Indian subcontinent have influenced each other in their religious beliefs and practices since the beginning of history and before. That the tribal religions have been influenced by Hinduism is widely accepted, but it is equally true that Hinduism, not only in its formative phase but throughout its evolution, has been influenced by tribal religions.'

His key point is that the exchange between tribal and Hindu belief systems was two-way, not one-way.
While it is often acknowledged that tribes adopted Hindu deities and practices, Béteille reminds us that Hinduism too absorbed tribal gods, rituals, and ideas.
For example, Jagannath at Puri is believed to have been originally a tribal deity.

This is a class-discussion question. Students can reflect on how cultures grow richer when they borrow from each other rather than remain isolated.

Answer: Béteille's point is that tribal religions and Hinduism have mutually influenced each other throughout history — it is not a one-way relationship. Each tradition has borrowed from and enriched the other.

Q6 Make a list of popular gods and goddesses in your region and the festivals they are associated with.

SOLUTION

This is a personal/regional activity. Here is a model answer with well-known examples that students can use as a reference.

Model examples:
- Durga (worshipped across India): associated with Durga Puja / Navaratri.
- Ganesha (especially Maharashtra and South India): associated with Ganesh Chaturthi.
- Lakshmi (pan-India): associated with Diwali.
- Krishna (Mathura, Vrindavan, Gujarat, Odisha): associated with Janmashtami.
- Saraswati (Bengal, South India): associated with Saraswati Puja / Basant Panchami.

Students should fill in the names of gods/goddesses worshipped locally in their own state or town and the festivals celebrated for them.

Answer: Model answer: Durga (Navaratri/Durga Puja), Ganesha (Ganesh Chaturthi), Lakshmi (Diwali), Krishna (Janmashtami), Saraswati (Basant Panchami). Students should add locally worshipped deities and festivals from their own region.

Q7 As a class activity, list two or three tribal groups from your region or State. Document some of their art and belief systems.

SOLUTION

This is a class-based research/documentation activity. Here is guidance on what to do and what to include.

Steps:
1. Identify 2–3 tribal communities from your State (e.g., Gond/Baiga in Madhya Pradesh, Munda/Santhal in Jharkhand, Bhil in Rajasthan/Gujarat, Toda in Tamil Nadu, Nyishi/Adi in Arunachal Pradesh).
2. Find out: What is their supreme deity or belief in nature spirits? Do they have a concept of a creator god?
3. Document their art forms: Gond art uses bright dot/line patterns; Warli art (Maharashtra) uses simple white geometric figures; Santhal art includes wall paintings and musical traditions.
4. Note which festivals or rituals are linked to nature — harvests, rivers,

mountains.

Present findings as a short written note, poster, or illustrated page for the class.

Answer: Guidance: Identify 2–3 tribal groups from your State, research their deities/belief systems and art forms (e.g., Gond painting, Warli art, Santhal music), and note their festivals tied to nature. Present as a class poster or short note.

Q8 True or False:

1. The Vedic hymns were written on palm-leaf manuscripts.
2. The Vedas are India's oldest texts.
3. The Vedic statement ekam sat vipra bahuddha vadanti reflects a belief in the unity of cosmic powers.
4. Buddhism is older than the Vedas.
5. Jainism emerged as a branch of Buddhism.
6. Both Buddhism and Jainism advocated for peaceful coexistence and the avoidance of harm to all living beings.
7. Tribal belief systems are limited to belief in spirits and minor deities.

SOLUTION

1. False. The Vedic hymns were not written — they were composed orally and memorised for hundreds of generations without written manuscripts.

2. True. The Vedas are India's most ancient texts and among the oldest in the world. The Rig Veda may date back to the 5th millennium BCE.

3. True. The statement means 'The Existent is one, but sages give it many names.' The early rishis and rishikas saw all gods and goddesses as one underlying reality.

4. False. The Vedas are far older. The Rig Veda may date to the 5th millennium BCE, while the Buddha lived around the 6th century BCE.

5. False. Jainism is an independent school of thought, not a branch of Buddhism. Both emerged around the same time but with separate origins and teachings.

6. True. Ahimsa (non-violence) is a core value of both Buddhism and Jainism. Both teach that no living being should be harmed, even in thought.

7. False. Many tribal groups have a concept of a supreme being. For example, tribes of Arunachal Pradesh worship Donyipolo and the Munda and Santhal tribals worship Singbonga as a supreme creator.

Answer: 1. False (oral transmission, not written). 2. True (oldest texts). 3. True (unity of cosmic reality). 4. False (Vedas far older). 5. False (Jainism is independent). 6. True (both teach ahimsa). 7. False (many tribes have concept of a supreme being).

Q9 Class Activity: Stage a small play with Yama, god of death, surrounded by several Nachiketas asking him questions about life.

SOLUTION

This is a hands-on class drama activity. Here is guidance on how to organise and perform it.

Setup:
- Assign roles: one student plays Yama (god of death), several students play Nachiketa.
- Yama can sit on a raised chair or a decorated seat to represent his throne.

What each Nachiketa can ask (draw from the chapter's Katha Upanishad story):
- 'O Yama, what happens to the atman after the body dies?'
- 'Is the self truly immortal? Does it take birth again?'
- 'How can we overcome fear of death?'
- 'What is the greatest knowledge a human being can seek?'

Yama's responses should reflect the chapter: the atman is immortal, is never born and never dies, is hidden within all creatures, and is one with brahman.

End the play with Nachiketa returning home, having gained this profound knowledge.

Answer: Guidance: Assign roles (Yama + several Nachiketas). Each Nachiketa asks questions about the atman, rebirth, and overcoming the fear of death. Yama answers that the self is immortal, hidden in all creatures, and never truly dies.