Chapter 8: How the Land Becomes Sacred

Questions — Questions and Activities

Q1 Read the following statement by a well-known environmental thinker, David Suzuki:

"The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it. If a mountain is a deity, not a pile of ore; if a river is one of the veins of the land, not potential irrigation water; if a forest is a sacred grove, not timber; if other species are biological kin, not resources; or if the planet is our mother, not an opportunity—then we will treat each other with greater respect. Thus is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective."

Discuss in small groups. What do you think this statement means? What implication does it have for our actions with respect to the air, water, land, trees and mountains around us?

SOLUTION

David Suzuki argues that our worldview—the way we perceive the natural world—directly determines how we treat it.

Meaning: When we see a mountain purely as a source of ore, we are willing to blast it for minerals. But if we see it as a deity—as many communities do—we approach it with reverence. The same applies to rivers, forests, and other species. Treating something as sacred creates responsibility and care; treating it only as a resource invites exploitation.

This connects to what the chapter teaches: ancient Indian traditions perceived rivers, mountains and forests as sacred, motivating communities to protect sacred groves (kavu in Kerala, dev van in Himachal Pradesh), prevent tree-felling on hills like Niyam Dongar (sacred to the Dongria Khond), and maintain the ecology around pilgrimage sites.

Implications for our actions:
If we view the Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Narmada and Kaveri as sacred, we would not dump waste or allow industrial effluents to poison them. If we see forests as sacred groves, we would not encroach on them. If we see mountains as divine, we would not mine them recklessly.

In short: a perspective that sees Nature as sacred leads to respect and

sustainability; seeing it only as a resource leads to overexploitation.

Answer: Our worldview determines how we treat Nature: seeing a river as sacred motivates protection; seeing it only as a resource leads to exploitation. India's tradition of sacred geography built exactly this protective relationship, which the chapter shows is now under strain.

Q2 List the sacred sites in your region. Enquire into why they are considered sacred. Are there stories connected with these sacred places? Write a short essay of 150 words. (Hint: You could speak to elders in your family and community, discuss with your teacher, read books and articles, etc., to gather relevant information.)

SOLUTION

Model answer (students should replace examples with sites from their own region):

India has countless sacred sites across every region. For example, in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Kashi Vishwanath is one of the twelve jyotirlingas dedicated to Shiva, and the city itself is considered sacred because it stands on the banks of the Ganga. Legend says Lord Shiva himself founded the city and that dying in Kashi leads to liberation. Nearby, the Sangam at Prayagraj—the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the invisible Sarasvati—is visited by millions at the Kumbh Mela every twelve years.

In the hills, Kedarnath in Uttarakhand is a Shiva tirtha accessible only by a long mountain trek, adding to its spiritual significance. In Tamil Nadu, the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai is associated with the goddess Meenakshi (a form of Parvati) and her marriage to Shiva—a story celebrated in elaborate festivals each year.

These sites are considered sacred because they are linked to divine events, pilgrimage traditions, and deep community memory, making them centres of cultural and spiritual life.

Answer: Model: India's sacred sites include Kashi Vishwanath (Varanasi), where Shiva is believed to grant liberation; the Sangam at Prayagraj (confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati); Kedarnath (a mountain jyotirlinga); and the Meenakshi Amman Temple (Madurai), linked to the divine marriage of Meenakshi and Shiva. Students should list and describe sites from their own region, enquiring from elders and teachers about the stories and traditions connected to each.

Q3 Why do you think natural elements like rivers, mountains and forests are considered sacred for the people? How do they contribute to our lives?

SOLUTION

Natural elements are considered sacred in Indian and many other traditions for two intertwined reasons—spiritual/cultural and practical.

Spiritual and cultural reasons:
In Hinduism and many folk and tribal belief systems, there is a perception of a divine presence in all of Nature. Rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri are worshipped as devis (goddesses). Mountains are seen as symbolic gateways from earth to heaven, which is why many temples are located on hilltops. Forests and specific trees—especially the peepul (Ficus religiosa), sacred to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism—are venerated. The entire planet is considered Mother Earth, or Bhudevi.

Tribal traditions extend this further: the Dongria Khond of Odisha consider the Niyam Dongar hill the abode of Niyam Raja; the Todas of the Nilgiris regard mountain peaks, Shola forests and specific trees as sacred.

Practical contributions to our lives:
Rivers provide fresh water for drinking and agriculture, sustaining millions of people. Mountains and forests regulate rainfall, prevent floods, and maintain biodiversity. Sacred groves, protected because of their religious status, shelter great biodiversity, include water bodies that aid conservation, and—as the Tamil Nadu example shows—protect fruit bats that pollinate flowers and disperse seeds. The peepul tree has medicinal uses and provides food and shelter to birds and animals.

Sacred geography thus fuses geography, culture and spirituality, protecting the natural environment while sustaining communities.

Answer: Natural elements are considered sacred because Indian traditions perceive a divine presence in all of Nature—rivers as goddesses, mountains as divine gateways, forests as abodes of deities. Practically, they sustain life: rivers provide water and fertile plains, forests maintain biodiversity, and sacred groves protect ecosystems and water conservation.

Q4 Why do people visit a tirtha or other sacred sites?

SOLUTION

People visit tirthas and sacred sites for a combination of religious, spiritual, social, and economic reasons.

Religious and spiritual reasons:
The word tirtha literally means a place where one can cross a river; symbolically, it is a place where one can cross from ordinary worldly life to a higher, spiritual life. Pilgrimage requires a specified code of conduct—discipline, detachment, and devotion. Sacred sites are associated with key figures or events in each faith: Buddhists visit Bodh Gaya (where the Buddha attained enlightenment); Sikhs visit the takhts associated with the Sikh Gurus; Jains visit tirthas of the Tirthankaras; Hindus undertake the char dham yatra, visit the 12 jyotirlingas, or go to the 51 Shakti pithas.

A dip at the confluence of sacred rivers—such as the Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati at Prayagraj during the Kumbh Mela—is considered especially auspicious and purifying.

Cultural and social reasons:
Pilgrimages bring together people from across regions, strengthening cultural bonds. Pilgrims encounter different languages, foods, customs and ideas, contributing to pan-Indian cultural integration. As Jawaharlal Nehru noted, pilgrimages from Badrinath and Kedarnath to Kanyakumari create the feeling of one country and one culture.

Economic reasons:
Pilgrimage routes also served as trade routes, since pilgrims needed various items that traders could provide. Sacred sites became centres of economic activity as well.

In summary, people visit sacred sites for spiritual merit, religious duty, cultural connection, and the transformative experience of the pilgrimage journey itself.

Answer: People visit tirthas for spiritual upliftment and religious merit (crossing from worldly to higher life), to honour key figures of their faith, for cultural integration through travel across India's diverse regions, and for economic exchange, since pilgrimage and trade routes overlapped.

Q5 How did the ancient pilgrimage routes help in fostering trade during those times? Do you think the sacred sites help in developing the economy of the region?

SOLUTION

Ancient pilgrimage routes and trade routes overlapping:
The chapter explains that pilgrimage routes and trade routes in ancient India often overlapped. Pilgrims travelling long distances needed food, clothing, and other supplies along the way. Traders set up at these points to supply pilgrims. Some traders themselves undertook pilgrimages, combining the religious journey with the purpose of taking their wares to distant towns.

Two major ancient trade routes—the Uttarapatha (connecting the northwestern and eastern parts of the Subcontinent) and the Dakshinapatha (going from Kaushambi through Ujjayini to Pratishthana)—ran through regions that were also important pilgrimage corridors. Goods traded included precious stones, shells, pearls, coins, gold, diamonds, cotton, spices, and sandalwood.

The pilgrimage network created a dense web of movement across India, and merchants followed the same corridors. The sharing of goods, experiences and ideas enriched both pilgrims and traders, contributing to cultural exchange and cultural integration.

Do sacred sites help develop the regional economy today?
Yes. Sacred sites that attract large numbers of pilgrims create significant economic activity. Pilgrims require accommodation, food, transport, and ritual items such as flowers, incense and devotional articles. This generates livelihoods for shopkeepers, priests, guides, hotel owners, and craftspeople. Major pilgrimage destinations like Bodh Gaya, Sabarimala, and Prayagraj (during the Kumbh Mela) draw millions of visitors, generating enormous economic activity in the surrounding region.

Answer: Ancient pilgrimage routes fostered trade because pilgrims needed supplies en route, attracting traders; routes like the Uttarapatha and Dakshinapatha served both purposes. Today, major sacred sites like Bodh Gaya, Sabarimala and Prayagraj draw millions of visitors annually, generating substantial economic activity in accommodation, food, transport, and local crafts.

Q6 How do sacred places influence the culture and traditions of the people living near them?

SOLUTION

Sacred places profoundly shape the culture, traditions, and daily lives of nearby communities in several ways.

Religious practices and ritual calendar:
Communities near sacred sites develop annual festivals and periodic pilgrimages around the site—such as the Pandharpur wari in Maharashtra, an 800-year-old tradition where pilgrims walk for 21 days to the Vithoba temple. The sacred site becomes the centre of the community's spiritual life.

Cultural integration:
Pilgrimage sites attract visitors from different parts of India, fostering cultural exchange. People from diverse regions share their languages, music, food, and stories, discovering shared cultural threads. As Nehru observed, this contributed to pan-Indian cultural integration.

Local traditions and legends:
Almost every region claims that the heroes of the Ramayana and Mahabharata passed through their locality, and shrines mark such passages—like the shrine in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, celebrating Rama's passage through the area. Such legends helped diverse communities connect with the epics and strengthen local cultural identity.

Environmental stewardship:
Communities near sacred groves protect the surrounding forests as abodes of deities. The Tamil Nadu tradition of protecting fruit bats in sacred groves illustrates how religious belief shapes ecological behaviour.

Economic and social life:
Sacred places generate markets for local craftspeople, flower sellers, musicians, and priests. Festivals associated with sacred sites become occasions for

community bonding, the settlement of disputes, and the exchange of goods.

Answer: Sacred places shape nearby culture by anchoring the ritual calendar, fostering cultural exchange among pilgrims from different regions, generating local legends connecting communities to shared epics, motivating environmental protection of sacred groves, and supporting livelihoods in crafts, trade, and religious services.

Q7 From the various sacred sites of India, select two of your choice and create a project explaining their significance.

SOLUTION

This is a project activity. Students should select two sacred sites, research them using textbooks, libraries, or the internet, and prepare a project with the following elements for each site:

What to include in the project:

1. Name and location of the site (state, district, nearby landmarks).
2. Which faith or community considers it sacred, and why.
3. The historical or mythological story associated with the site.
4. The type of sacred site: tirtha (riverbank), mountain shrine, sacred grove, temple, stupa, gurudwara, or other.
5. Festivals or pilgrimages associated with the site and how many people visit.
6. Its significance for cultural integration—how it brings people from different regions together.
7. Any environmental or ecological significance (e.g., a sacred grove protecting biodiversity).
8. Current challenges: is the site facing pollution, encroachment, or neglect? What can be done?

Sample sites students might choose:

Bodh Gaya (Bihar) — where the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; a UNESCO World Heritage Site sacred to Buddhists worldwide.

Rishikesh and Haridwar (Uttarakhand) — gateway tirthas on the Ganga; sites of the Kumbh Mela; sacred to Hindus.

The Golden Temple/Harmandir Sahib (Amritsar, Punjab) — the holiest Sikh shrine, surrounded by the sacred Amrit Sarovar (Pool of Nectar).

Ajmer Sharif Dargah (Rajasthan) — the dargah of the Sufi saint Khwaja

Moinuddin Chishti; visited by people of all faiths.
Palitana (Gujarat) — a hilltop with 863 Jain temples, sacred to Jains as a cluster of Jain tirthas.

Students should present findings as a poster, booklet, or oral presentation with images, maps, and their own observations.

Answer: Project guidance: Select two sacred sites from different faiths or regions. For each, document: (1) name and location, (2) which community considers it sacred and why, (3) the associated story or history, (4) festivals/pilgrimages and visitor numbers, (5) its role in cultural integration, (6) any ecological significance, and (7) current challenges. Sample sites: Bodh Gaya (Buddhist), Harmandir Sahib/Golden Temple (Sikh), Ajmer Sharif Dargah (Sufi/Muslim), Palitana (Jain), Haridwar (Hindu).

Q8 What is the two-fold significance of a tirthayatra or a pilgrimage?

SOLUTION

The chapter describes a two-fold significance of a tirthayatra (pilgrimage): an inner or spiritual significance, and an outer or social-cultural significance.

1. Inner/Spiritual significance:
A tirthayatra is not just a physical journey but also an inner journey. The word tirtha symbolically means a place where one can cross from ordinary worldly life to a higher, spiritual life. The pilgrimage requires a specified code of conduct—discipline, detachment from daily comforts, and devotion. The physical challenges of the journey (such as arduous treks to hilltop shrines like Sabarimala) symbolise the difficulties of the inner spiritual path. The pilgrimage thus serves the individual's spiritual development and growth.

2. Outer/Social-cultural and economic significance:
At the same time, pilgrimages served a major social and cultural purpose. For at least 3,000 years, Indians have been crisscrossing the Subcontinent on pilgrimage, resulting in the entire geography being considered sacred. This movement created contact between people from different regions, languages, and customs. Pilgrims shared goods, experiences, stories, and ideas, and new ideas emerged while old ones were adapted—a major factor in the pan-Indian cultural integration of the Subcontinent.

Pilgrimage routes also overlapped with trade routes, enabling economic

exchange.

As Jawaharlal Nehru observed, the great pilgrimages from Badrinath and Kedarnath to Kanyakumari created the feeling of one country and one culture across the Indian Subcontinent.

Answer: The two-fold significance of a tirthayatra: (1) Inner/spiritual — an inner journey of self-purification and spiritual growth, requiring discipline and crossing from ordinary to higher life; and (2) Outer/social-cultural — fostering pan-Indian cultural integration by bringing together people from diverse regions and enabling the exchange of goods, ideas, and traditions.