Chapter 17: India, a Home to Many

Questions — Questions and Activities

Q1 On the outline of a world map, try to trace the routes that the communities mentioned in this chapter may have used to reach India. What types of physical geographies did they have to negotiate?

SOLUTION

This is a map activity. On your outline map, trace the following routes:

Jews (Bene Israel, ~175 BCE): From ancient Israel (West Asia) → across the Arabian Sea → Konkan coast south of Mumbai. Physical geography: open sea crossing, possibly the Sinai coast.

Syriac Christians (from 4th century CE): From West Asia (Syria/Persia region) → along coastal trade routes eastward → Malabar coast, Kerala. They negotiated the arid West Asian plains and the Arabian Sea.

Parsis (8th–10th centuries CE): From Persia (modern Iran) → across the Arabian Sea → western coast of India (Gujarat). Physical geography: open sea, possibly via the coast of Oman.

Arab merchants (from 7th century CE): From the Arabian Peninsula → across the Arabian Sea using monsoon winds → Kerala, Gujarat, Karnataka coasts. Well-established maritime route.

Siddis (7th–19th centuries): From East Africa → across the Indian Ocean → west coast of India. Physical geography: long open-ocean crossing.

Armenians (from 8th century, major settlements from 16th century): From Armenia (between Turkey and Azerbaijan, north of Iran) → overland through Persia → to Agra, Surat, Kolkata, Chennai. Physical geography: mountain passes of the Iranian plateau and the Thar approaches.

Tibetan refugees (1959): From Tibet → across the Himalayan range → to Dharamshala and Karnataka. Physical geography: the world's highest mountain range, extreme altitude and cold.

Polish children (1942–46): From Poland (Europe) → by sea/overland during wartime → to Jamnagar, Gujarat. Physical geography: war-torn Europe and long sea route via Suez or Cape.

Mark each community's origin and draw an arrow to their Indian destination. Use

a legend to label each route.

Answer: Trace on the map: Jews from Israel across the Arabian Sea to the Konkan coast; Syriac Christians from West Asia to Kerala; Parsis from Persia across the Arabian Sea to Gujarat; Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula to Kerala/Gujarat/Karnataka; Siddis from East Africa across the Indian Ocean; Armenians overland from Armenia/Persia to Agra, Kolkata, Chennai; Tibetans across the Himalayas to Dharamshala/Karnataka; Polish children from Europe to Jamnagar. Physical geographies negotiated include open seas, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Iranian plateau, mountain passes, and the Himalayan range.

Q2 What are the key values intrinsic to Indian culture that enable it to welcome people of different backgrounds?

SOLUTION

Indian culture holds several deep-rooted values that have historically made it a place of refuge and acceptance.

1. Vasudhaiva kutumbakam — 'The whole world is family': From the Hitopadesha. India's practice of giving shelter to Jews, Parsis, Syriac Christians, Tibetans, and others shows this is not merely a slogan.

2. Atithi devo bhava — 'A guest is like God': Guests and strangers seeking shelter are treated with reverence, not suspicion.

3. Sarve bhavantu sukhinah — 'May all creatures be happy': A universal wish for the well-being of all, not just one's own group.

4. Karuna (compassion) and ahimsa (non-violence): Central to India's civilisational heritage, these values underpin the acceptance of persecuted communities.

5. The Buddhist ideal of loving-kindness: The Karaniya Metta Sutta expresses cherishing all living beings with a boundless heart.

6. Peaceful coexistence of diverse faiths: India allowed communities to practise their own religions freely — synagogues, fire temples, churches, and monasteries all coexisted.

Answer: India's key welcoming values are vasudhaiva kutumbakam (the whole world is family), atithi devo bhava (a guest is like God), sarve bhavantu sukhinah (may all be happy), karuna and ahimsa, the Buddhist ideal of loving-kindness, and a tradition of allowing all faiths to be practised freely.

Q3 Homi Bhabha, Sam Maneckshaw, Ratan Tata, Fali Nariman, Nani Palkivala, and Cornelia Sorabji are a few names of Parsis who excelled in their respective fields. Find out more about people from other communities that made India their home and their contributions.

SOLUTION

The chapter itself names several notable individuals from communities that came to India:

From the Siddi community (African origin):
Hirabai Lobi — worked for the upliftment of women in her community, connecting them with banking services and educating them about organic farming and livelihood options. Awarded the Padma Shri in 2023.

From the Armenian community:
Abdul Hai — served as Chief Justice in Akbar's court.
Lady Juliana — served as a doctor in the Mughal royal palace.

The Parsis named in the question all show how Zoroastrians who arrived fleeing persecution in Persia became foundational contributors to modern India: Homi Bhabha (nuclear scientist), Sam Maneckshaw (Field Marshal), Ratan Tata (industrialist), Fali Nariman and Nani Palkivala (eminent jurists), Cornelia Sorabji (India's first woman lawyer).

Across all communities — Jews, Syriac Christians, Parsis, Arab settlers, Armenians, Baha'is, Tibetans, and Siddis — communities that found refuge in India integrated over time and contributed to Indian society, culture, commerce, the arts, and governance.

Answer: The chapter mentions Hirabai Lobi (Siddi, Padma Shri 2023 — women's upliftment), Abdul Hai (Armenian Chief Justice in Akbar's court), and Lady Juliana (Armenian royal physician). The Parsis named — Homi Bhabha, Sam Maneckshaw, Ratan Tata, Fali Nariman, Nani Palkivala, Cornelia Sorabji — show how communities that sought refuge became foundational contributors to modern India.

Q4 Take up a class project. Divide the class into groups. Each group takes up a small project to study a little more about the communities listed here. Share what you have gathered with your classmates through one of these ways — drama, posters, song, painting, etc.

SOLUTION

This is a group project activity. Here is guidance on how to approach it:

Step 1 — Assign communities: Divide into groups, one per community (Jews, Syriac Christians, Parsis, Arab merchants, Siddis, Armenians, Baha'is, Tibetans, Polish refugees).

Step 2 — Research: Use the chapter, library books, and reliable websites. Find out: (a) why the community came to India, (b) where they settled, (c) what they contributed to Indian culture, arts, trade, or governance, (d) how they integrated while keeping their own traditions alive.

Step 3 — Choose a presentation format:
Drama — enact the story of arrival and welcome (e.g., the Parsi legend of milk and sugar).
Poster — draw a map showing the community's journey, their symbols, famous members, and contributions.
Song — compose a short song about their journey or their values.
Painting — depict a scene of integration (e.g., a Parsi wedding showing Indian elements as in the Raja Ravi Varma painting).

Step 4 — Present to the class and discuss: What surprised you? What values made India welcome them?

Answer: Group activity: assign one community per group (Jews, Parsis, Syriac Christians, Arab merchants, Siddis, Armenians, Baha'is, Tibetans, Polish refugees). Research why they came, where they settled, and how they contributed. Present through drama, poster, song, or painting — e.g., enact the Parsi milk-and-sugar legend, or draw a journey map with key figures and contributions.