Chapter 8: Cultural Currents: 13th to 17th Centuries

Exercise 8.1 — Questions and Activities

Q1 What is the path to moksha that became popular in the period from the 13th to 17th centuries?

The bhakti marga (path of devotion) became the most popular path to moksha during the 13th to 17th centuries. The chapter explains that moksha means realisation of Truth or release from the cycle of death and rebirth. The bhakti path did not require rituals or priests, making it accessible to people across all sections of society. Its renewed popularity during this period reflected cultural continuity and society's search for spiritual resilience amid political and religious upheaval.

Q2 Name three bhakti saints from different regions of India and identify the key messages they promoted.

Three bhakti saints from different regions: (1) Kabirdas (north India, Uttar Pradesh) — promoted the oneness of God and criticised empty rituals of both Hinduism and Islam, preaching unity between Ram and Rahim. (2) Ravidas (north India, early 16th century) — composed poetry promoting equality and oneness of all people, breaking down the rigid barriers of varna and jati. (3) Purandaradasa (south India, Vijayanagara empire) — known as the father of Carnatic music, he composed devotional kirtanas spreading the message of devotion to Krishna. Other valid examples from the chapter include Mirabai (Rajasthan), Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (east), and Tukaram or Namdev (west).

Q3 Kabir's doha compares wheat being ground into flour with the unity of Ram and Rahim. Why do you think he used this everyday example?

Kabir used the image of wheat being ground into flour because it was drawn from the everyday experience of ordinary people — an image everyone could see and understand. When wheat is ground, individual grains lose all distinction and become one flour. Similarly, Kabir taught that when one truly realises the divine, the apparent differences between Ram (god in Hinduism) and Rahim (god in Islam) dissolve into oneness. By choosing such a simple, domestic example instead of complex theological language, Kabir made a profound spiritual idea instantly accessible to common people, regardless of their religion or learning.

Q4 The chapter mentions that while major universities like Nalanda were destroyed, education continued through decentralised systems like gurukulas, temple schools, and apprenticeships. What advantages might these smaller, local systems have had in surviving political turmoil?

Decentralised systems had several key advantages over large universities. First, being spread across countless villages, temples, and homes, they had no single point of failure — destroying one did not destroy the rest. Second, they were embedded in community life: gurukulas lived within households, temple schools within places of worship, and apprenticeships within families and guilds, so learning continued as long as those communities survived. Third, the chapter notes that in regions like Vijayanagara, rulers actively supported temples and mathas, providing protection. Finally, the jati and shreni systems that governed crafts and trades were also decentralised by nature, making it difficult for political disruptions to erase them entirely.

Q5 Women's roles changed differently across regions during this period. What factors mentioned in the chapter might explain why the same historical events affected women differently in different regions?

The chapter points to several factors that explain the regional differences. In north India, the invasions and military campaigns from the 12th century onwards led to women being imprisoned and sold as slaves, prompting protective measures such as the purdah and the veil (ghunghat) to shield women from public exposure — practices that became widespread mainly in north India. In contrast, the chapter explicitly states that in south India, the situation for women did not change significantly: societal norms of the past continued, elite women exercised power, issued grants, and influenced political decisions, and wall engravings at Hampi depict women in active public life. This contrast shows that proximity to invasion routes and ruling-class practices (the Muslim aristocracy's purdah system) shaped north Indian norms, while the relative stability of the Vijayanagara Empire preserved older traditions in the south.

Q6 The chapter describes how Indian culture sometimes 'adopted or adapted' external influences. Why do you think adaptation (changing something to fit local tastes) might be more successful for cultural survival than simply copying or completely rejecting new ideas?

Simple copying would replace the original culture with a foreign one, while complete rejection would cut off useful new ideas and create conflict. Adaptation, by contrast, allows a culture to absorb the best of outside influences while retaining its own core identity. The chapter gives vivid examples: the samosa evolved from the Persian sambaseh but was filled with potatoes and peas instead of meat and nuts, making it suit local tastes and dietary practices. The jalebi was adapted from the Persian zalabiyeh. Mughal gardens borrowed the Persian charbagh design but were built around Indian forts and temples. Tansen composed in Sufi-influenced styles while also continuing to praise Krishna and Shiva. Each example shows that adaptation preserved Indian identity while enriching it — which is precisely why these adapted forms thrived and survive to the present day.

Q7 What are some examples of cultural interactions that led to the creation of new art forms?

The chapter provides several examples. (1) Qawwali: Amir Khusrau fused Indian classical musical styles with Persian and Arabic singing traditions to develop the qawwali, a form of Sufi devotional song. (2) Mughal miniature painting: shaped by Persian influences but produced in collaboration with Indian painters, creating a distinct court-painting tradition separate from the Rajput style; the two styles also influenced each other, with court scenes and garden motifs entering Rajput paintings. (3) Hindustani classical music: the sitar and tabla evolved during this period through experimentation by musicians and instrument-makers from various backgrounds, combining Indian musical traditions with new influences. (4) Banarasi silk saris and Pashmina shawls: weavers from Gujarat brought their expertise to Banaras, and the Mughals introduced zari and brocade techniques, creating the distinctive Banarasi style; Pashmina embroidery took on Persian floral motifs. (5) Urdu language: developed from Hindavi spoken in the Ganga-Yamuna plains, integrating Persian and Arabic words, becoming a rich literary language.

Q8 Research one bhakti or Sufi saint mentioned in the chapter (Kabir, Mirabai, Ravidas, Tukaram, Chishti or others). Find one of their poems or bhajans in translation, and prepare a three-minute presentation where you: (a) Share the poem/song, (b) Explain its main message, (c) Describe why it might have appealed to common people during that time, and (d) Discuss whether its message is still relevant today.

This is a research-and-presentation activity. Guidance: Choose a saint from the chapter — for example, Kabirdas, who lived in 15th-century Uttar Pradesh and composed in everyday language accessible to all. (a) Find a translated doha or poem: for instance, the doha discussed in the chapter itself — 'When wheat is ground into flour, all distinctions between individual grains disappear; they become one substance. Similarly, when one realises the divine, all differences between Ram and Rahim dissolve.' (b) Main message: God is one, and all divisions of religion, caste, and community dissolve in the experience of the divine. (c) Appeal during that time: It used the everyday image of grinding wheat — familiar to every household — to make a profound point. In a period of religious tension and rigid social hierarchies, its message of equality and unity gave hope and comfort to ordinary people who felt excluded from formal religion. (d) Relevance today: The message of religious harmony and human equality remains deeply relevant in modern India and the world, where religious and social divisions continue to cause conflict. Your presentation should be 2–3 minutes, include the poem read aloud, and end with your own reflection on its contemporary relevance.

Q9 Choose one aspect of culture from the chapter (architecture, clothing, food, music, education, or gardens) and create a group project to study how it appears in your region. Try to enquire into: What has changed and what has remained the same over time? What are your thoughts on why certain elements continued while others changed? You can present your report in any form — as an illustrated report, or digital presentation, or in any other creative way.

This is a group project activity. Guidance: Select one aspect — for example, food. Using the chapter as your starting point, identify dishes in your region that show cultural exchange from the 13th–17th centuries (the chapter mentions samosas, jalebis, naan, khichri, and the use of cardamom, clove, turmeric, and ghee as examples of cross-cultural influence). Investigate: Which dishes arrived from Persian or Central Asian traditions? Which are ancient Indian recipes that absorbed new flavours? Which have been adapted to local ingredients and tastes? For change vs continuity: the chapter's key insight is that Indian culture adopted and adapted rather than simply copying — so look for examples where a dish changed its filling or syrup (like samosa or jalebi) but the form survived. Consider interviewing elders, visiting local markets or restaurants, and comparing recipes across generations. Present your findings as an illustrated report or slide deck, noting sources and including photographs where possible.