CURRICULAR MODULE

(developed by Prof. Iryna Babik, Bose University)

Mosaic of Identities: Indian Diasporas, their Journeys and Stories

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## 1. Background

While comparing cultures, many students tend to perceive Indian culture as very homogenous, especially when contrasted with the United States, which is often described as a "melting pot" of diverse backgrounds and identities. In reality, India is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, with a vast array of languages, religions, ethnic groups, and regional traditions coexisting within its borders. This internal diversity includes major religious communities such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists, as well as tribal groups, linguistic minorities, and distinct regional cultures that differ dramatically in food, dress, customs, and values. Additionally, the presence of diasporic communities from other countries within India, such as Jews from the Middle East, Parsis from Persia, and Tibetans from China –further enriches the country's cultural and religious diversity. Recognizing this complexity challenges simplistic notions of Indian culture and highlights the importance of approaching all cultures, whether Indian, American, or otherwise, with a nuanced and informed perspective.

The purpose of this curricular unit is to explore the complexity of India's internal diversity by highlighting the histories and experiences of lesser-known cultural communities. Through case studies that focus on both resilience and hardship, students will gain a deeper understanding of how identity, migration, and belonging intersect within and beyond India's borders. For example, the story of the Cossacks in Bhopal – Russian refugees who fled after World War II only to face displacement, poverty, and eventual disappearance from public memory – offers a heart-wrenching look at a tragic and largely forgotten chapter of India's multicultural history. In contrast, the journey of the Parsi community, descendants of Persian Zoroastrians who fled Islamic persecution and settled in Gujarat and later Mumbai, showcases a narrative of adaptation and success. Together, these stories invite students to examine how minority communities navigate loss, belonging, cultural preservation, and transformation in a diverse and dynamic society. They also emphasize the diversity of the Indian society.

## 2. Story #1 – The Story of the Russian Diaspora in India: Running from one Tragedy to Another

The story of the Russian Cossacks in Bhopal, India, is a fascinating but little-known episode in global history, rooted in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the shifting politics of the early 20th century. It is a story of war, exile, tragedy, survival, and ultimately, obscurity. It begins in the early 20th century with the fall of the Russian Empire and the rise of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Cossacks – fiercely independent warrior communities from regions such as the Don, Kuban, and Terek – had long served as frontier guards and elite cavalry for the Tsars. Deeply loyal to the old regime and hostile to communist ideology, they were viewed with suspicion and targeted for harsh reprisals during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). Thousands were executed or deported in the Red Terror, and their traditional way of life was dismantled by Stalin's policies of collectivization and repression.

**Figure 1.** Illustration depicting a Cossack raid on a Korean village during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904. © Photos.com/Getty Images.

In the face of these threats, many Cossack families scattered across Europe, China, and parts of the Middle East. Some fled southward through the Caucasus and Central Asia, eventually making their way toward India. In the early 20th century, many Russians were

fascinated by India as a land of ancient wisdom, spiritual depth, and exotic mystery. For example, Roerich family in Russia extensively explored spiritual traditions of India. While painting the Church of the Holy Spirit in Talashkino, Russia, in 1908-1914, Nicholas Roerich depicted the Virgin Mary in the image of the Indian goddess Kali. Influenced by oriental scholarship, travel memoirs, and theosophical movements, many Russians perceived Indian philosophy and culture as a source of mystical knowledge that contrasted sharply with Europe's industrial modernity. For intellectuals, artists, and émigrés, India represented both a refuge from political upheaval and a symbolic "paradise" for spiritual renewal and cultural discovery. This fascination deepened during the revolutionary period, when India's colonial struggle and cultural richness resonated with broader Russian debates about identity, freedom, and civilization.

Despite the elusive allure of India, the journey of the Russian Cossacks from their homeland to the promised "paradise" in the early 1920s was harrowing – marked by starvation, disease, and armed conflict, as they passed through Iran and Afghanistan, often traveling on foot or by makeshift transport across treacherous terrain. During those times, Iran was divided into spheres of influence – the north under Russian control and the south under British – which made it a tense zone during the refugees' passage. In northern Iran, some Russian officers and soldiers joined local monarchist or tribal forces trying to resist both the British and Bolshevik influence. Afghanistan was officially neutral, but King Amanullah Khan was walking a tightrope between Soviet and British pressures. Some Russian émigrés attempted to gain asylum or military alliances in Afghanistan, but many were mistrusted, imprisoned, or quietly encouraged to keep moving toward British India. The refugees often had to disguise their identities or bribe tribal leaders to pass safely through territories where no central control existed.

Some Russian refugees settled briefly in refugee camps established by the British Empire in places like Quetta (in present-day Pakistan). These camps were crowded and harsh, with limited resources. Diseases like typhoid and cholera spread rapidly. Russian women and children often faced the worst conditions, and many died before reaching safer areas. Despite this, Quetta became a critical transitional point. From there, a smaller group continued to British India in

hopes to reach the “paradise.” Many arrived with nothing but their cultural heritage and the hope of rebuilding their lives. Since colonial India was considered by Russian refugees a zone governed by European law, they hoped to arrive under the protection of the laws of His Majesty the King of England. However, the Viceroy’s government refused to issue visas to people from Russia in general, and to military personnel in particular. The refusal to accept Russian refugees was explained by Britain's sensitive reaction to Russia’s ambitions to expand its influence in Asia, evidenced by secret military plans for a campaign into India, which had been developed by the General Staff of the Russian Army prior to 1914. As a result, in most cases, Russians crossed the border illegally and continued their journey toward large cities of Calcutta and Bombay.

**Figure 2.** The free Cossacks: A special breed of Russian. www.rbth.com

Many Russian refugees faced deep disillusionment after arriving in what they had imagined to be the “magical and wealthy” land of India. The excitement of entering a “wonderland” quickly gave way to cultural shock and rejection. They despised intense heat, the overwhelming population density that made personal space impossible, and the presence of monkeys and “sacred” cows in public spaces. Russians were disturbed by what they perceived as social disorder, poverty, disease, and administrative arbitrariness. Particularly striking was their disdain for Indian religious traditions, which many viewed as a profanation of the sacred. Feeling like prisoners of their circumstances, many Russian refugees made little effort to understand local customs and culture, instead perceiving the Indian people through a lens of cultural superiority, often dismissing them as “barbaric.”

By the 1930s, a small population of Russian Cossacks found an unexpected sanctuary in the princely state of Bhopal, then ruled by the progressive and internationally connected Nawab Hamidullah Khan. Known for his diplomatic engagement and hospitality, the Nawab granted the refugees permission to settle on land near the periphery of the city. Their enclave, modest in size, was nonetheless distinctive – homes with sloping roofs, vegetable gardens, and the sound of Russian hymns mixing with the Islamic call to prayer. Though stateless and impoverished, they maintained aspects of their cultural identity: Russian Orthodox Christianity, traditional folk songs and dances, elements of Cossack dress and storytelling, and even culinary traditions, preparing simple versions of classic Russian dishes with locally available ingredients.

The Cossacks valued courage, independence, religious faith, communal loyalty, and a deep connection to tradition and the land. The strong moral values and cultural identity of the

Russian Cossacks, while a source of resilience, also posed challenges to their integration into Indian society. Their deep-rooted sense of independence and communal exclusivity made it difficult to fully adapt to new social structures that required compromise and assimilation. The Cossacks' unwavering loyalty to the Russian Orthodox Church and their emphasis on religious and cultural preservation often limited meaningful engagement with the predominantly Muslim and Hindu communities around them. Their militaristic ethos and pride in being frontier warriors may have clashed with the expectations of a civilian life in exile, where manual labor and marginal economic roles replaced the prestige they once held. Furthermore, their reliance on insular communal governance and traditional codes of honor could make it hard to navigate the bureaucratic and legal systems of colonial India. Together, these factors created a sense of isolation and cultural dissonance, contributing to the gradual erosion of their distinct identity over generations.

Moreover, life in Bhopal was far from easy. The Cossacks were a community in exile, without official citizenship or stable employment. They had to deal not only with the harshness


of the climate and limited resources, but also with bureaucratic hurdles and corruption, which

often delayed aid, complicated employment opportunities, and left them without proper documentation or legal protection. Many took up manual labor, farm work, or odd jobs to survive. Over time, intermarriage with local Muslims and Hindus led to cultural blending, and younger generations began to lose their linguistic and ethnic ties to Russia. Still, the elders kept oral histories alive, recounting tales of snow-covered steppes, horse-mounted warriors, and the trauma of exile. These stories, passed from one generation to the next, became their last links to a lost homeland.

**Figure 3.** Cossacks in India.
https://generalplatoffdoncossackchorus.com/publicityphotos/4-cossacks-in-india/

By the 1980s, the small and fading community of Russian Cossack in Bhopal lived in the working-class neighborhoods near the Union Carbide pesticide plant – neighborhoods that were densely populated, poorly ventilated, and economically marginalized. On the night of December 3, 1984, a catastrophic industrial disaster struck the city of Bhopal, when a toxic gas called methyl isocyanate leaked from a pesticide plant. The toxic gas spread quickly through nearby neighborhoods as people slept. It caused immediate choking, burning eyes, and lung damage, leading to thousands of deaths within hours and leaving survivors with long-term respiratory, neurological, and reproductive health problems. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy, considered one of the world's worst industrial disasters, killed an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people and injured hundreds of thousands more, with the poorest communities nearest the plant – including the nearly invisible Cossack descendants – bearing the brunt of the catastrophe.

**Figure 4.** Bhopal gas tradedy, 1984.
https://sohanews.sohacdn.com/2015/bhopal-disaster-1450069217874.jpg

Lacking formal recognition, legal documentation, or powerful advocates, many Cossack descendants received no compensation, no medical aid, and no official acknowledgment. In the chaos of relief efforts and legal proceedings, they were grouped in with others or forgotten altogether. The tragedy not only decimated their numbers but also further erased their fragile legacy. Today, no monuments, no street names, and few public records remain to acknowledge the presence of the Russian Cossacks in Bhopal. A handful of oral histories, collected by local researchers and journalists, are all that survive. Their story is emblematic of how history often overlooks the smallest, most vulnerable populations, even when they are part of defining events. And yet, their journey – from the Russian steppes to the heart of India, through war, refuge, and disaster – is a powerful testament to human endurance and the quiet struggles of forgotten communities.

**3. Story #2 – The Story of the Parsi Diaspora in India: The Flame That Crossed the Sea**

More than a thousand years ago, as the sacred Zoroastrian fire temples of Persia faced the looming threat of conquest and religious persecution, a small group of devoted followers made the courageous decision to leave their homeland in search of freedom and safety. Their ancient religion – founded by the prophet Zarathustra and once the spiritual heart of the mighty Achaemenid Empire – faced extinction under the rising tide of Islam. In the wake of the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7th century CE, many Zoroastrians faced forced conversions, taxation, and cultural suppression. Determined to preserve their faith and identity, they began a long, uncertain journey that would lead them across the sea to India.

By the 8th or 9th century CE, a fleet carrying Zoroastrian refugees set sail from the Persian Gulf. Historical accounts suggest that they first landed on the coast of Gujarat, at a place called Sanjan. There, the local Hindu ruler, Jadi Rana, was cautious but curious. When the newcomers asked for asylum, he reportedly brought a bowl of milk filled to the brim, symbolizing that his kingdom was already full. In response, the leader of the Zoroastrians added a spoonful of sugar to the milk – demonstrating they would blend in sweetly without causing

overflow. Impressed by this gesture and their respectful demeanor, the king agreed to grant them refuge.

However, this offer came with specific conditions: Zoroastrians must adopt the local language, wear Indian dress, and allow their women to walk unveiled, aligning with regional customs. Most importantly, the Zoroastrians were instructed not to attempt to convert locals to their religion. This final condition was particularly significant in preserving communal harmony. On the one hand, India was, and remains, a religiously plural society, and avoiding attempts to convert locals to a different religion helped prevent frictions with the Hindu majority. On the other hand, Zoroastrianism is not a missionary religion by nature. Unlike some other faiths, it has historically focused on the purity of lineage and preservation within the community. As a result, Parsis themselves generally do not seek converts, and in many cases, do not even accept converts, especially if born outside the faith. The Zoroastrians agreed to the king's conditions, and thus began their life in India. Over time, they became known as Parsis, meaning "Persians."

The Parsis settled primarily in Gujarat, especially in the towns of Sanjan, Navsari, and Surat, and, centuries later, in Bombay (now Mumbai). While they maintained their religious beliefs and rituals – like the sacred fire temples and the solemn prayers of the Avesta – they also embraced many aspects of Indian culture. For example, they adopted local languages, dress, and customs, blending in harmoniously with the communities around them. Over time, this cultural integration helped them build strong social and economic ties while preserving their distinct identity. Thus, their unique identity reflected both deep reverence for their ancient past and pragmatic adaptation to their new homeland.

The Parsi community places a strong emphasis on a triad of core virtues: good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. These three principles are more than just moral guidelines, they are the ethical foundation of Zoroastrian philosophy and daily Parsi life. Parsis are taught to cultivate purity and positivity in their thoughts. This includes striving for truth, rejecting deceit, and maintaining a charitable mindset toward others. Thought is seen as the seed of action, nurturing good intentions is essential for living a virtuous life. Speech carries power, and Parsis are encouraged to speak truthfully, kindly, and constructively. Avoiding gossip, lies, or harmful language is a moral obligation. Respectful communication is seen as a reflection of inner integrity and a means to build harmony within society. Action is where intention and speech are realized. Parsis believe that their role in the world is to actively promote goodness through

service, generosity, and ethical behavior. Charity, community service, environmental stewardship, and supporting the vulnerable are all expressions of this virtue.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, as Bombay developed into a major port city within global trade networks, the Parsis seized new opportunities for economic and social advancement. Fluent in English, skilled in commerce, renowned for their honesty and integrity, and trusted by the British, they emerged as key intermediaries between colonial authorities and local Indian communities. With hard work and enterprise, many Parsis grew into influential merchants, shipbuilders, and industrialists. They helped build India's modern economy: one ship, one textile mill, one steel plant at a time.

Few individuals are as revered as Jamsetji Tata, the founder of the Tata Group and often regarded as the father of Indian industry. Driven by a vision of self-sufficient Indian enterprise, Tata pioneered steel production, hospitality, and hydroelectric power. His descendants went on to create institutions like the Indian Institute of Science, Tata Steel, and Air India. The Tata Trusts, among India's largest philanthropic foundations, continue to support education, healthcare, and the arts. Other luminaries followed: Dadabhai Naoroji, the “Grand Old Man of India,” was the first Asian elected to the British Parliament and an early voice for Indian independence. Homi J. Bhabha, a nuclear physicist, led India’s atomic energy program. Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen, carried his Parsi roots to the global stage. In law, medicine, art, and cinema, the Parsis left a mark far beyond their numbers.

Furthermore, Parsis introduced ideas of sanitation, women’s education, and public health in Indian cities. They donated generously to build schools, libraries, and hospitals, serving not just their own but all communities. Their temples, often secluded and austere, kept the sacred fires burning for generations, even as modernity surged around them. Today, the Parsi community in India is small, less than 60,000, but their legacy looms large. With concern over declining birth rates and community continuity, there is reflection but also pride. They remain a symbol of how a displaced people can enrich their new home, not by conquest or numbers, but by values, integrity, and contribution.

**Figure 5.** A Parsi fire temple in the Fort district of Mumbai, India. Photograph: Rainer Krack/Alamy Stock Photo.

An important chapter in the story of Parsi adaptation involves their response to ecological changes. Rooted in ancient Zoroastrian beliefs about purity and the sacredness of natural elements, Parsis traditionally avoid cremation or burial. Instead, they practice dokhmenashini, placing the dead in circular Towers of Silence to be consumed by vultures – a method seen as spiritually and ecologically pure. Parsis continued this tradition after they arrived in India. However, beginning in the 1990s, over 97% of India's vultures died out due to diclofenac, a veterinary drug used to treat livestock that remained in carcasses left in the open, which vultures consumed, leading to fatal kidney failure. This sudden near-extinction of vultures disrupted funerary practices of Parsi, especially in cities like Mumbai, leading to slow decomposition, public health concerns, and spiritual distress within the community. As a result, nowadays many Parsis continue to use Towers of Silence with modifications like solar concentrators to aid decomposition. However, growing numbers – particularly in urban areas – now quietly opt for cremation, reflecting a shift toward practicality while grappling with traditional religious norms.

**Figure 6.** Vultures perched on one of the Towers of Silence in Mumbai, circa 1880. Photograph: Chris Hellier/Alamy Stock Photo.

In summary, the story of the Parsis is a testament to resilience. It reminds us that the true strength of a diaspora lies not in its size but in its capacity to adapt without losing identity, to serve without seeking dominance, and to sweeten the society it becomes a part of – just as a spoonful of sugar once did in a king's bowl of milk.

**Figure 3**. A Parsi navjote ceremony in Mumbai in 2016. Photograph: Hemis/Alamy Stock Photo.

**4. Deliverables**

Write a comparative essay (approx. 1,000–1,200 words) that draws on the two diaspora stories you read in this module: The Story of the Russian Diaspora in India and The Story of the Parsi Diaspora in India. Your essay should respond thoughtfully to the following three questions:

1) How did each community respond to displacement and resettlement in India, and what challenges did they face in preserving their cultural identity? Consider how migration shaped their cultural practices, sense of belonging, and adaptation strategies.
2) In what ways did the historical and social context of India shape the long-term outcomes of each diaspora? Reflect on how factors like political alliances, economic status, religious norms, and local support influenced the Cossacks' marginalization and the Parsis' integration and success.
3) What do these two stories reveal about how minority communities navigate visibility, survival, and legacy in a diverse society like India? Explore how power, memory, and recognition affect whether communities are remembered or forgotten.

***Rubrics for the Essay:***

1. Content (70 points)
    - Comparative Analysis (60 points): Addressing all aspects of the three questions posted.
    - Originality and Insight (10 points): Demonstrates original thought and insightful analysis.
2. Organization and Structure (15 points)
    - Introduction (5 points): Clear introduction that sets the context and outlines the purpose of the essay.
    - Body (5 points): Well-organized body with logical flow and coherence.
    - Conclusion (5 points): Strong conclusion that summarizes key points and implications.
3. Writing Quality (15 points)
    - Clarity and Style (10 points): Writing is clear, concise, and engaging.
    - Grammar and Mechanics (5 points): Free from grammatical errors and typos.

Total: 100 points

**5. Suggested Readings**

Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology,* 9(3), 302–338.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/656365

Luhrmann, T. M. (1996). *The good Parsi: the fate of a colonial elite in a postcolonial society*. Harvard University Press.

Palsetia, J. S. (2001). *The Parsis of India: Preservation of identity in Bombay city* (vol. 17). Brill.

Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies, 1*(1), 83–99. https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.1.1.83

Vertovec, S. (2001). Transnationalism and identity. J*ournal of Ethnic and Migration studies, 27*(4), 573–582. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120090386

Walker S. (2020, August). *The last of the Zoroastrians: A funeral, a family, and a journey into a disappearing religion.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/06/last-of-the-zoroastrians-parsis-mumbai-india-ancient-religion