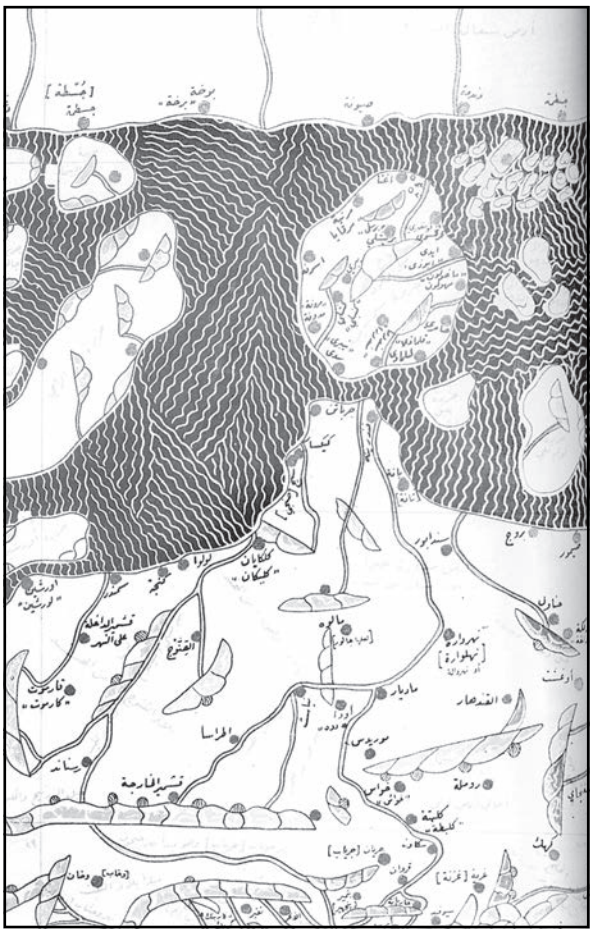
1 INTRODUCTION: TRACING CHANGES THROUGH A THOUSAND YEARS



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Map 1
A section of the world map drawn by the geographer al-Idrisi in the twelfth century showing the Indian subcontinent from land to sea.

Take a look at Maps 1 and 2. Map 1 was made in 1154 CE by the Arab geographer Al-Idrisi. The section reproduced here is a detail of the Indian subcontinent from his larger map of the world. Map 2 was made in the 1720s by a French **cartographer**. The two maps are quite different even though they are of the same area. In al-Idrisi's map, south India is where we would expect to find north India and Sri Lanka is the island at the top. Place-names are marked in Arabic,

Cartographer
A person who makes maps.



Map 2
The subcontinent, from the early-eighteenth-century Atlas Nouveau *of Guillaume de l'Isle.*

and there are some well-known names like Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh (spelt in the map as Qanauj). Map 2 was made nearly 600 years after Map 1, during this period, information about the subcontinent had changed considerably. This map seems more familiar to us and the coastal areas in particular are surprisingly detailed. This map was used by European sailors and merchants on their voyages.

Look at the areas in the interior of the subcontinent on Map 2. Are they as detailed as those on the coast? Follow the course of the River Ganga and see how it is shown. Why do you think there is a difference in the level of detail and accuracy between the coastal and inland areas in this map?

Equally important is the fact that the science of cartography differed in the two periods. When historians read documents, maps and texts from the past, they have to be sensitive to the different historical backgrounds – the *contexts* – in which information about the past was produced.

New and Old Terminologies

If the context in which information is produced changes with time, what about language and meanings? Historical records exist in a variety of languages which have changed considerably over the years. Medieval Persian, for example, is different from modern Persian. The difference is not just with regard to grammar and vocabulary; the meanings of words also change over time.

Take the term "Hindustan", for example. Today we understand it as "India", the modern *nation-state*. When the term was used in the thirteenth century by Minhaj-i-Siraj, a chronicler who wrote in Persian, he meant the areas of Punjab, Haryana and the lands between the Ganga and Yamuna. He used the term in a political sense for lands that were a part of the dominions of the Delhi Sultan. The areas included in this term shifted with the extent of the Sultanate but the term never included south India. By contrast, in the early sixteenth century, Babur used Hindustan to describe the geography, the fauna and the culture of the inhabitants of the subcontinent. As we will see later in the chapter, this was somewhat similar to the way the fourteenth-century poet Amir Khusrau used the word "Hind". While the idea of a geographical and cultural entity like "India" did exist, the term "Hindustan" did not carry the political and national meanings which we associate with it today.

Historians today have to be careful about the terms they use because they meant different things in the past. Take, for example, a simple term like "foreigner". It is used today to mean someone who is not an Indian.



Can you think of any other words whose meanings change in different contexts?

In the medieval period, a "foreigner" was any stranger who appeared say in a given village, someone who was not a part of that society or culture. (In Hindi the term *pardesi* might be used to describe such a person and in Persian, *ajnabi*.) A city-dweller, therefore, might have regarded a forest-dweller as a "foreigner", but two peasants living in the same village were not foreigners to each other, even though they may have had different religious or caste backgrounds.

Historians and their Sources

Historians use different types of sources to learn about the past depending upon the period of their study and the nature of their investigation. Last year, for example, you read about rulers of the Gupta dynasty and Harshavardhana. In this book we will read about the following thousand years, from roughly 700 to 1750.

You will notice some continuity in the sources used by historians for the study of this period. They still rely on coins, inscriptions, architecture and textual records for information. But there is also considerable discontinuity. The number and variety of textual records increased dramatically during this period. They slowly displaced other types of available information. Through this period, paper gradually became cheaper and more

The value of paper

Compare the following:

(1) In the middle of the thirteenth century a scholar wanted to copy a book. But he did not have enough paper. So he washed the writing off a manuscript he did not want, dried the paper and used it.

(2) A century later, if you bought some food in the market you could be lucky and have the shopkeeper wrap it for you in some paper.



When was paper more expensive and easily available – in the thirteenth or the fourteenth century?

widely available. People used it to write holy texts, chronicles of rulers, letters and teachings of saints, petitions and judicial records, and for registers of accounts and taxes. Manuscripts were collected by wealthy people, rulers, monasteries and temples. They were placed in libraries and **archives**. These manuscripts and documents provide a lot of detailed information to historians but they are also difficult to use.

There was no printing press in those days so scribes copied manuscripts by hand. If you have ever copied a friend's homework you would know that this is not a simple exercise. Sometimes you cannot read your friend's handwriting and are forced to guess what is written. As a result there are small but significant differences in your copy of your friend's work. Manuscript copying is somewhat similar. As scribes copied manuscripts, they also introduced small changes – a word here, a sentence there. These small differences grew over centuries of copying until manuscripts of the

Archive
A place where documents and manuscripts are stored. Today all national and state governments have archives where they keep all their old official records and transactions.



Fig. 1
A painting of a scribe making a copy of a manuscript. This painting is only 10.5 cm by 7.1 cm in size. Because of its size it is called a miniature. Miniature paintings were sometimes used to illustrate the texts of manuscripts. They were so beautiful that later collectors often took the manuscripts apart and sold just the miniatures.



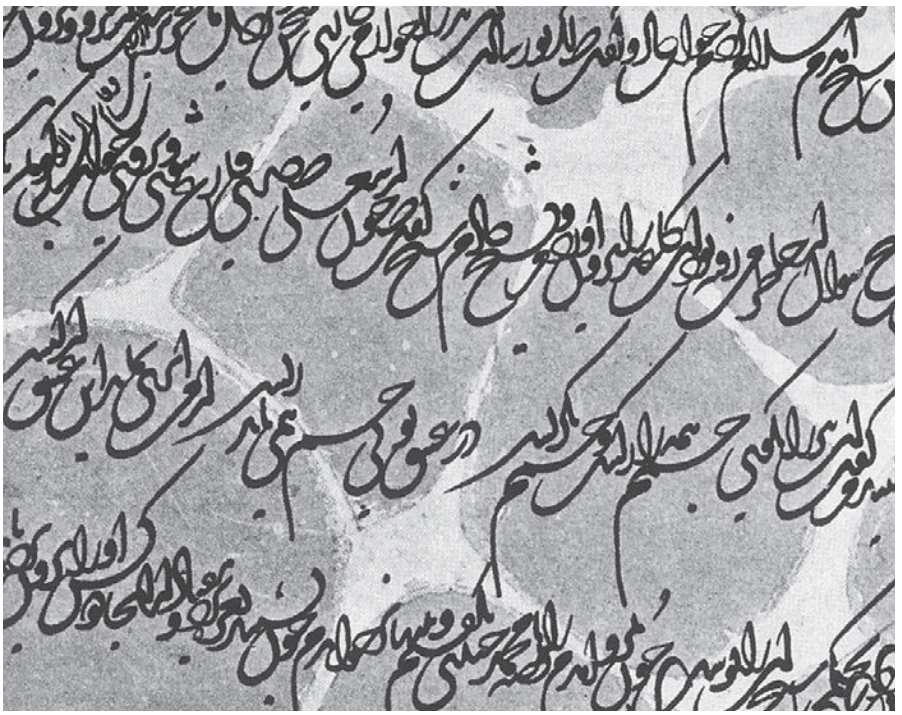


Fig. 2
Different kinds of handwriting could make the reading of Persian and Arabic difficult. The nastaliq *style (on the left) is cursive and easy to read, the* shikaste *(on the right) is denser and more difficult.*

same text became substantially different from one another. This is a serious problem because we rarely find the original manuscript of the author today. We are totally dependent upon the copies made by later scribes. As a result, historians have to read different manuscript versions of the same text to guess what the author had originally written.

On occasion authors revised their chronicles at different times. The fourteenth-century chronicler Ziyauddin Barani wrote his chronicle first in 1356 and another version two years later. The two differ from each other but historians did not know about the existence of the first version until the 1960s. It remained lost in large library collections.

New Social and Political Groups

The study of the thousand years between 700 and 1750 is a huge challenge to historians largely because of the scale and variety of developments that occurred over the period. At different moments in this period, new technologies made their appearance – like the Persian

wheel in irrigation, the spinning wheel in weaving, and firearms in combat. New foods and beverages arrived in the subcontinent – potatoes, corn, chillies, tea and coffee. Remember that all these innovations – new technologies and crops – came along with people, who brought other ideas with them as well. As a result, this was a period of economic, political, social and cultural changes. You will learn about some of these changes in Chapter 5.

This was also a period of great mobility. Groups of people travelled long distances in search of opportunity. The subcontinent held immense wealth and the possibilities for people to carve a fortune. One group of people who became important in this period were the Rajputs, a name derived from "Rajaputra", the son of a ruler. Between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, the term was applied more generally to a group of warriors who claimed Kshatriya caste status.

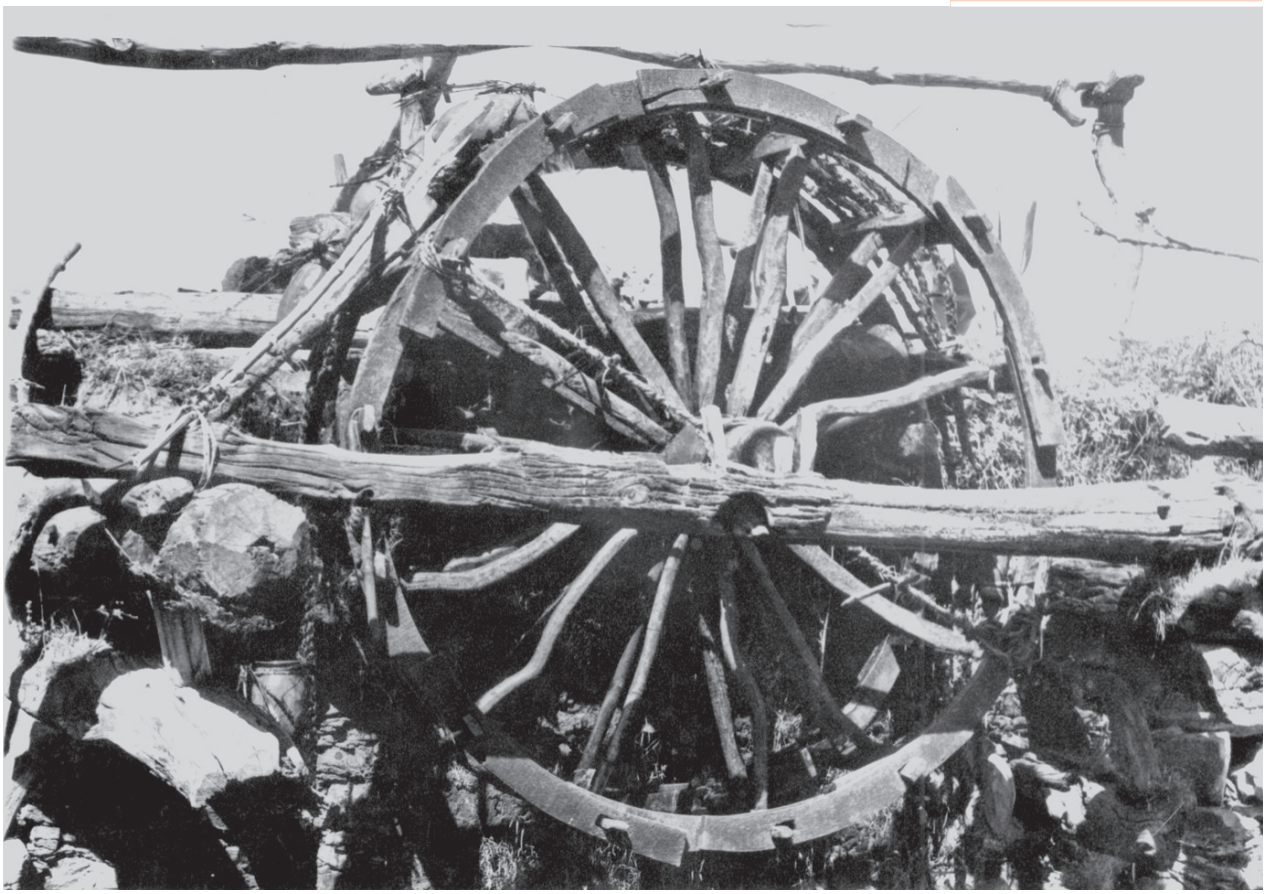


Fig. 3
The Persian wheel.

The term included not just rulers and chieftains but also soldiers and commanders who served in the armies of different monarchs all over the subcontinent. A chivalric code of conduct – extreme valour and a great sense of loyalty – were the qualities attributed to Rajputs by their poets and bards. Other groups of people such as the Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Ahoms and Kayasthas (a caste of scribes and secretaries) also used the opportunities of the age to become politically important.

Throughout this period there was a gradual clearing of forests and the extension of agriculture, a change faster and more complete in some areas than in others. Changes in their **habitat** forced many forest-dwellers to migrate. Others started tilling the land and became peasants. These new peasant groups gradually began to be influenced by regional markets, chieftains, priests, monasteries and temples. They became a part of large, complex societies, and were required to pay taxes and offer goods and services to local lords. As a result, significant economic and social differences emerged amongst peasants. Some possessed more productive land, others also kept cattle, and some combined artisanal work with agricultural activity during the lean season. As society became more differentiated, people were grouped into *jatis* or sub-castes and ranked on the basis of their backgrounds and their occupations. Ranks were not fixed permanently, and varied according to the power, influence and resources controlled by members of the *jati*. The status of the same *jati* could vary from area to area.

Jatis framed their own rules and regulations to manage the conduct of their members. These regulations were enforced by an assembly of elders, described in some areas as the *jati panchayat*. But *jatis* were also required to follow the rules of their villages. Several villages were governed by a chieftain. Together they were only one small unit of a state.

Habitat
Refers to the environment of a region and the social and economic lifestyle of its residents.



Of the technological, economic, social and cultural changes described in this section, which do you think were most significant in the town or village in which you live?

Region and Empire

Large states like those of the Cholas (Chapter 2), Tughluqs (Chapter 3) or Mughals (Chapter 4) encompassed many regions. A Sanskrit *prashasti* (see Chapter 2 for an example of a *prashasti*) praising the Delhi Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (1266-1287) explained that he was the ruler of a vast empire that stretched from Bengal (Gauda) in the east to Ghazni (Gajjana) in Afghanistan in the west and included all of south India (Dravida). People of different regions – Gauda, Andhra, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat – apparently fled before his armies. Historians



I	Siwistan	VII	Sarsuti	XIII	Kara	XIX	Gujarat
II	Uchch	VIII	Kuhram	XIV	Aswadh	XX	Devagiri
III	Multan	IX	Hansi	XV	Bihar	XXI	Tilingana
IV	Kalanaur	X	Delhi	XVI	Lakhnauti	XXII	Talanj
V	Lahor	XI	Badayun	XVII	Jajnagar	XXIII	Dvarasamudra
VI	Samana	XII	Qannauj	XVIII	Malwa	XXIV	Ma'bar

Map 3
Provinces of the Delhi Sultanate during Muhammad Tughluq's reign according to the Egyptian source Masalik al-Absar fi Mamalik al-Amsar *of Shihabuddin Umari.*

Why do you think rulers made such claims?

regard these as exaggerated claims of conquests. At the same time, they try to understand why rulers kept claiming to have control over different parts of the subcontinent.

Language and region

In 1318, the poet Amir Khusrau noted that there was

a different language in every region of this land: Sindhi, Lahori, Kashmiri, Dvarsamudri (in southern Karnataka), Telangani (in Andhra Pradesh), Gujari (in Gujarat), Ma'bari (in Tamil Nadu), Gauri, (in Bengal) … Awadhi (in eastern Uttar Pradesh) and Hindawi (in the area around Delhi).

Amir Khusrau went on to explain that in contrast to these languages, there was Sanskrit which did not belong to any region. It was an old language and *"common people do not know it, only the Brahmanas do".*

Make a list of the languages mentioned by Amir Khusrau. Prepare another list of the names of languages spoken today in the regions he mentioned. Underline the names that are similar and circle those that are different.

Did you notice that the names by which languages are known have changed over time?

By 700 many regions already possessed distinct geographical dimensions and their own language and cultural characteristics. You will learn more about these in Chapter 7. They were also associated with specific ruling dynasties. There was considerable conflict between these states. Occasionally dynasties like the Cholas, Khaljis, Tughluqs and Mughals were able to build an empire that was pan-regional – spanning diverse regions. Not all these empires were equally stable or successful.

When the Mughal Empire declined in the eighteenth century, it led to the re-emergence of regional states (Chapter 8). But years of imperial, pan-regional rule had altered the character of the regions. Across most of the subcontinent, the regions were left with the legacies of the big and small states that had ruled over them. This was apparent in the emergence of many distinct and shared traditions: in the realms of governance, the management of the economy, elite cultures and language. Through the thousand years between 700 and 1750, the character of the different regions did not grow in isolation. These regions felt the impact of larger pan-regional forces of integration without ever quite losing their distinctiveness.



Find out whether and for how long your state was a part of these pan-regional empires.

Old and New Religions

The thousand years of history that we are exploring witnessed major developments in religious traditions. People's belief in the divine was sometimes deeply personal, but more usually it was collective. Collective belief in a supernatural agency – religion – was often closely connected with the social and economic organisation of local communities. As the social worlds of these groups altered, so too did their beliefs.



Do you remember what Amir Khusrau had to say regarding Sanskrit, knowledge and Brahmanas?

It was during this period that important changes occurred in what we call Hinduism today. These included the worship of new deities, the construction of temples by royalty and the growing importance of Brahmanas, the priests, as dominant groups in society.

Their knowledge of Sanskrit texts earned the Brahmanas a lot of respect in society. Their dominant position was consolidated by the support of their **patrons** – new rulers searching for prestige.

Patron
An influential, wealthy individual who supports another person – an artiste, a craftsperson, a learned man, or a noble.

One of the major developments of this period was the emergence of the idea of bhakti – of a loving, personal deity that devotees could reach without the aid of priests or elaborate rituals. You will be learning about this, and other traditions, in Chapter 6.

This was also the period when new religions appeared in the subcontinent. Merchants and migrants first brought the teachings of the holy *Quran* to India in the seventh century. Muslims regard the *Quran* as their holy book and accept the sovereignty of the one God, Allah, whose love, mercy and bounty embrace all those who believe in Him, without regard to social background.

Many rulers were patrons of Islam and the *ulama* – learned theologians and jurists. And like Hinduism, Islam was interpreted in a variety of ways by its followers. There were the Shia Muslims who believed that the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, was the legitimate leader of the Muslim community, and the Sunni Muslims who accepted the authority of the early leaders (Khalifas) of the community, and the succeeding Khalifas. There were other important differences between the various schools of law (Hanafi and Shafi'i mainly in India), and in theology and mystic traditions.

Thinking about Time and Historical Periods

Historians do not see time just as a passing of hours, days or years – as a clock or a calendar. Time also reflects changes in social and economic organisation, in the persistence and transformation of ideas and beliefs. The study of time is made somewhat easier by dividing the past into large segments – periods – that possess shared characteristics.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, British historians divided the history of India into three periods: "Hindu", "Muslim" and "British". This division was based on the idea that the religion of rulers was the only important historical change, and that there were no other significant developments – in the economy, society or culture. Such a division also ignored the rich diversity of the subcontinent.

Few historians follow this periodisation today. Most look to economic and social factors to characterise the major elements of different moments of the past. The histories you read last year included a wide range of early societies – hunter-gatherers, early farmers, people living in towns and villages, and early empires and kingdoms. The histories you will be studying this year are often described as "medieval". You will find out more about the spread of peasant societies, the rise of regional and imperial state formations – sometimes at the cost of pastoral and forest people – the development of Hinduism and Islam as major religions and the arrival of European trading companies.

These thousand years of Indian history witnessed considerable change. After all, the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries were quite different from the eighth or the eleventh. Therefore, describing the entire period as one historical unit is not without its problems. Moreover, the "medieval" period is often contrasted with the "modern" period. "Modernity" carries with it a sense of material progress and intellectual advancement. This seems to suggest that the medieval period was lacking in any change whatsoever. But of course we know this was not the case.

During these thousand years, the societies of the subcontinent were transformed often and economies in several regions reached a level of prosperity that attracted the interest of European trading companies. As you read this book, look out for signs of change and the historical processes at work. Also, whenever you can, compare what you read in this book with what you read last year. Look out for changes and continuities wherever you can, and look at the world around you to see what else has changed or remained the same.

KEYWORDS

manuscript

jati

region

periodisation

Imagine



You are a historian. Choose one of the themes mentioned in this chapter, such as economic, social or political history, and discuss why you think it would be interesting to find out the history of that theme.

Let's recall

1. Who was considered a "foreigner" in the past?

2. State whether true or false:

   (a) We do not find inscriptions for the period after 700.

   (b) The Marathas asserted their political importance during this period.

   (c) Forest-dwellers were sometimes pushed out of their lands with the spread of agricultural settlements.

   (d) Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban controlled Assam, Manipur and Kashmir.

3. Fill in the blanks:

   (a) Archives are places where _____ are kept.

   (b) _____ was a fourteenth-century chronicler.

   (c) _____, _____, _____, _____ and _____ were some of the new crops introduced into the subcontinent during this period.

4. List some of the technological changes associated with this period.

5. What were some of the major religious developments during this period?

Let's understand

6. In what ways has the meaning of the term "Hindustan" changed over the centuries?

7. How were the affairs of *jatis* regulated?

8. What does the term pan-regional empire mean?

Let's discuss

9. What are the difficulties historians face in using manuscripts?

10. How do historians divide the past into periods? Do they face any problems in doing so?

Let's do

11. Compare either Map 1 or Map 2 with the present-day map of the subcontinent, listing as many similarities and differences as you can find.

12. Find out where records are kept in your village or city. Who writes these records? Is there an archive? Who manages it? What kinds of documents are stored there? Who are the people who use it?