7 THE MAKING OF REGIONAL CULTURES



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One of the commonest ways of describing people is in terms of the language they speak. When we refer to a person as a Tamil or an Oriya, this usually means that he or she speaks Tamil or Oriya and lives in Tamil Nadu or Orissa. We also tend to associate each region with distinctive kinds of food, clothes, poetry, dance, music and painting. Sometimes we take these identities for granted and assume that they have existed from time immemorial. However, the frontiers separating regions have evolved over time (and in fact are still changing). Also, what we understand as regional cultures today are often the product of complex processes of intermixing of local traditions with ideas from other parts of the subcontinent. As we will see, some traditions appear specific to some regions, others seem to be similar across regions, and yet others derive from older practices in a particular area, but take a new form in other regions.

?

Find out how many states have been created in the last 10 years. Is each of these states a region?

The Cheras and the Development of Malayalam

Let us begin by looking at an example of the connection between language and region. The Chera kingdom of Mahodayapuram was established in the ninth century in the south-western part of the peninsula, part of the present-day Kerala. It is likely that Malayalam was spoken in this area. The rulers introduced the Malayalam language and script in their inscriptions. In fact, this is one of the earliest examples of the use of a regional language in official records in the subcontinent.



Fig. 1
An early Kerala inscription, composed in Malayalam.

At the same time, the Cheras also drew upon Sanskritic traditions. The temple theatre of Kerala, which is traced to this period, borrowed stories from the Sanskrit epics. The first literary works in Malayalam, dated to about the twelfth century, are directly indebted to Sanskrit. Interestingly enough, a fourteenth-century text, the *Lilatilakam*, dealing with grammar and poetics, was composed in Manipravalam – literally, "diamonds and corals" referring to the two languages, Sanskrit and the regional language.

Find out when the language(s) you speak at home were first used for writing.

Rulers and Religious Traditions: The Jagannatha Cult

In other regions, regional cultures grew around religious traditions. The best example of this process is the cult of Jagannatha (literally, lord of the world, a name for Vishnu) at Puri, Orissa. To date, the local tribal people make the wooden image of the deity, which suggests that the deity was originally a local god, who was later identified with Vishnu.



Fig. 2
The icons of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannatha, palm-leaf manuscript, Orissa.

In the twelfth century, one of the most important rulers of the Ganga dynasty, Anantavarman, decided to erect a temple for Purushottama Jagannatha at Puri. Subsequently, in 1230, king Anangabhima III dedicated his kingdom to the deity and proclaimed himself as the "deputy" of the god.

As the temple gained in importance as a centre of pilgrimage, its authority in social and political matters also increased. All those who conquered Orissa, such as the Mughals, the Marathas and the English East India Company, attempted to gain control over the temple. They felt that this would make their rule acceptable to the local people.



Fig. 3
Jagannatha temple, Puri.

The Rajputs and Traditions of Heroism

In the nineteenth century, the region that constitutes most of present-day Rajasthan, was called Rajputana by the British. While this may suggest that this was an area that was inhabited only or mainly by Rajputs, this is only partly true. There were (and are) several groups who identify themselves as Rajputs in many areas of northern and central India. And of course, there are several peoples other than Rajputs who live in Rajasthan. However, the Rajputs are often recognised as contributing to the distinctive culture of Rajasthan.

Fig. 4
Prince Raj Singh of Bikaner.



These cultural traditions were closely linked with the ideals and aspirations of rulers. From about the eighth century, most of the present-day state of Rajasthan was ruled by various Rajput families. Prithviraj (Chapter 2) was one such ruler. These rulers cherished the ideal of the hero who fought valiantly, often choosing death on the battlefield rather than face defeat. Stories about Rajput heroes were recorded in poems and songs, which were recited by specially trained minstrels.

These preserved the memories of heroes and were expected to inspire others to follow their example. Ordinary people were also attracted by these stories – which often depicted dramatic situations, and a range of strong emotions – loyalty, friendship, love, valour, anger, etc.

Did women find a place within these stories? Sometimes women are depicted as following their heroic husbands in both life and death – there are stories about the practice of *sati* or the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands. So those who followed the heroic ideal often had to pay for it with their lives.



Map 1
Regions discussed in this chapter.

Beyond Regional Frontiers: The Story of *Kathak*

If heroic traditions can be found in different regions in different forms, the same is true of dance. Let us look at the history of one dance form, Kathak, now associated with several parts of north India. The term *kathak* is derived from *katha*, a word used in Sanskrit and other languages for story. The *kathaks* were originally a caste of story-tellers in temples of north India, who embellished their performances with gestures and songs. Kathak began evolving into a distinct mode of dance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the spread of the bhakti movement. The legends of Radha-Krishna were enacted in folk plays called *rasa lila*, which combined folk dance with the basic gestures of the *kathak* story-tellers.

Under the Mughal emperors and their nobles, Kathak was performed in the court, where it acquired its present features and developed into a form of dance with a distinctive style. Subsequently, it developed in two traditions or *gharanas*: one in the courts of Rajasthan (Jaipur) and the other in Lucknow. Under the patronage of Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, it grew into a major art form. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, it was firmly entrenched as a dance form not only in these two regions, but in the adjoining areas of present-day Punjab, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir,



Fig. 5
Dance class, Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho.

Find out whether there are traditions of heroes/heroines in your town or village. What are the qualities associated with them? In what ways are these similar to or different from the heroic ideals of the Rajputs?

Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Emphasis was laid on intricate and rapid footwork, elaborate costumes, as well as on the enactment of stories.

Kathak, like several other cultural practices, was viewed with disfavour by most British administrators in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it survived and continued to be performed by courtesans, and was recognised as one of the six "classical" forms of dance in the country after independence.

"Classical" dances

The question of defining any art form as "classical" is often quite complicated. Do we define something as classical if it deals with a religious theme? Or do we consider it classical because it appears to require a great deal of skill acquired through long years of training? Or is it classical because it is performed according to rules that are laid down, and variations are not encouraged? These are questions we need to think about. It is worth remembering that many dance forms that are classified as "folk" also share several of the characteristics considered typical of "classical" forms. So, while the use of the term "classical" may suggest that these forms are superior, this need not always be literally true.

Other dance forms that are recognised as classical at present are:

Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu)
Kathakali (Kerala)
Odissi (Odisha)
Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh)
Manipuri (Manipur)



Fig. 6
Kathak dancers, a court painting.

Find out more about any one of these dance forms.

Painting for Patrons: The Tradition of Miniatures

Another tradition that developed in different ways was that of miniature painting. Miniatures (as their very name suggests) are small-sized paintings, generally done in water colour on cloth or paper. The earliest miniatures were on palm leaves or wood. Some of the most beautiful of these, found in western India, were used to illustrate Jaina texts. The Mughal emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan patronised highly skilled painters who primarily illustrated manuscripts containing historical accounts and poetry. These were generally painted in brilliant colours and portrayed court scenes, scenes of battle or hunting, and other aspects of social life. They were often exchanged as gifts and were viewed only by an exclusive few – the emperor and his close associates.



Fig. 7
Akbar resting during a hunt, Mughal miniature.

With the decline of the Mughal Empire, many painters moved out to the courts of the emerging regional states (see also Chapter 8). As a result Mughal artistic tastes influenced the regional courts of the Deccan and the Rajput courts of Rajasthan. At the same time, they retained and developed their distinctive characteristics. Portraits of rulers and court scenes came to be painted, following the Mughal example. Besides, themes from mythology and poetry were depicted at centres such as Mewar, Jodhpur, Bundi, Kota and Kishangarh.

Another region that attracted miniature paintings was the Himalayan foothills around the modern-day state of Himachal Pradesh. By the late seventeenth



Fig. 8
Maharana Ram Singh II playing holi. Rajput miniature, Kota.

century, this region had developed a bold and intense style of miniature painting called Basohli. The most popular text to be painted here was Bhanudatta's *Rasamanjari*. Nadir Shah's invasion and the conquest of Delhi in 1739 resulted in the migration of Mughal artists to the hills to escape the uncertainties of the plains. Here they found ready patrons which led to the founding of the Kangra school of painting. By the mid-eighteenth century the Kangra artists developed a style which breathed a new spirit into miniature painting. The source of inspiration was the Vaishnavite traditions. Soft colours including cool blues and greens, and a lyrical treatment of themes distinguished Kangra painting.



Fig. 9
Krishna, Radha and her companion, Pahari miniature, Kangra.

Remember that ordinary women and men painted as well — on pots, walls, floors, cloth — works of art that have

occasionally survived, unlike the miniatures that were carefully preserved in palaces for centuries.

A Closer Look: Bengal

The Growth of a Regional Language

As we saw at the outset, we often tend to identify regions in terms of the language spoken by the people. So, we assume that people in Bengal always spoke Bengali. However, what is interesting is that while Bengali is now recognised as a language derived from Sanskrit, early Sanskrit texts (mid-first millennium BCE) suggest that the people of Bengal did not speak Sanskritic languages. How, then, did the new language emerge?

From the fourth-third centuries BCE, commercial ties began to develop between Bengal and Magadha (south Bihar), which may have led to the growing influence of Sanskrit. During the fourth century, the Gupta rulers established political control over north Bengal and began to settle Brahmanas in this area. Thus, the linguistic and cultural influence from the mid-Ganga valley became stronger. In the seventh century, the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang observed that languages related to Sanskrit were in use all over Bengal.

From the eighth century, Bengal became the centre of a regional kingdom under the Palas (Chapter 2). Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bengal was ruled by Sultans who were independent of the rulers in Delhi (Chapter 3). In 1586, when Akbar

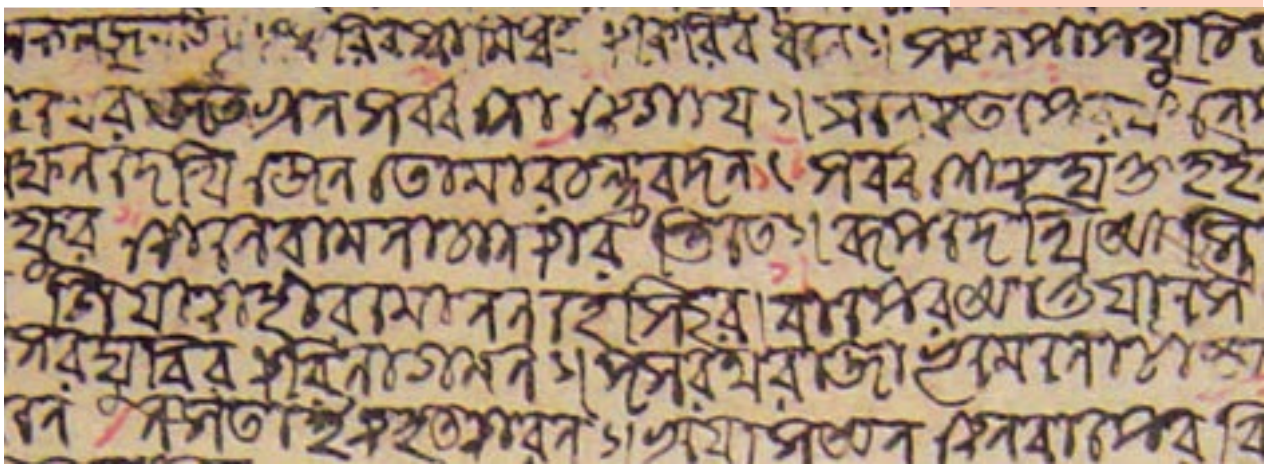


Fig. 10
A page from a palm-leaf manuscript of the earliest Bengali Ramayana.

conquered Bengal, it formed the nucleus of the Bengal *suba*. While Persian was the language of administration, Bengali developed as a regional language.

In fact, by the fifteenth century the Bengali group of dialects came to be united by a common literary language based on the spoken language of the western part of the region, now known as West Bengal. Thus, although Bengali is derived from Sanskrit, it passed through several stages of evolution. Also, a wide range of non-Sanskrit words, derived from a variety of sources including tribal languages, Persian, and European languages, have become a part of modern Bengali.

Early Bengali literature may be divided into two categories – one indebted to Sanskrit and the other independent of it. The first includes translations of the Sanskrit epics, the Mangalakavyas (literally auspicious poems, dealing with local deities) and bhakti literature, such as the biographies of Chaitanyadeva, the leader of the Vaishnava bhakti movement (Chapter 6).

The second includes Nath literature, such as the songs of Maynamati and Gopichandra, stories concerning the worship of Dharma Thakur, and fairy tales, folk tales and ballads.

Maynamati, Gopichandra and Dharma Thakur

The Naths were ascetics who engaged in a variety of yogic practices.

This particular song, which was often enacted, described how Maynamati, a queen, encouraged her son Gopichandra to adopt the path of asceticism in the face of a variety of obstacles.

Dharma Thakur is a popular regional deity, often worshipped in the form of a stone or a piece of wood.

The texts belonging to the first category are easier to date, as several manuscripts have been found indicating that they were composed between the

late fifteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. Those belonging to the second category circulated orally and cannot be precisely dated. They were particularly popular in eastern Bengal, where the influence of Brahmanas was relatively weak.

Pirs and Temples

From the sixteenth century, people began to migrate in large numbers from the less fertile western Bengal to the forested and marshy areas of south-eastern Bengal. As they moved eastwards, they cleared forests and brought the land under rice cultivation. Gradually, local communities of fisherfolk and shifting cultivators, often tribals, merged with the new communities of peasants.

This coincided with the establishment of Mughal control over Bengal with their capital in the heart of the eastern delta at Dhaka. Officials and functionaries received land and often set up mosques that served as centres for religious transformation in these areas.

The early settlers sought some order and assurance in the unstable conditions of the new settlements. These were provided by community leaders, who also functioned as teachers and adjudicators and were sometimes ascribed with supernatural powers. People referred to them with affection and respect as *pirs*.

This term included saints or Sufis and other religious personalities, daring colonisers and deified soldiers, various Hindu and Buddhist deities and even **animistic** spirits. The cult of *pirs* became very popular and their shrines can be found everywhere in Bengal.

Bengal also witnessed a temple-building spree from the late fifteenth century, which culminated in the nineteenth century. We have seen (Chapter 2) that temples and other religious structures were often built by individuals or groups who were becoming powerful – to both demonstrate their power and proclaim their piety. Many of the modest brick



Why do you think the second category of texts was not written down?

Pir
A Persian word meaning a spiritual guide.

Animism
Attribution of living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena.

and terracotta temples in Bengal were built with the support of several "low" social groups, such as the Kolu (oil pressers) and the Kansari (bell metal workers). The coming of the European trading companies created new economic opportunities; many families belonging to these social groups availed of these. As their social and economic position improved, they proclaimed their status through the construction of temples. When local deities, once worshipped in thatched huts in villages, gained the recognition of the Brahmanas, their images began to be housed in temples. The temples began to copy the double-roofed (*dochala*) or four-roofed (*chauchala*) structure of the thatched huts. This led to the evolution of the typical Bengali style in temple architecture.

In the comparatively more complex four-roofed structure, four triangular roofs placed on the four walls move up to converge on a curved line or a point. Temples were usually built on a square platform. The interior was relatively plain, but the outer walls of many temples were decorated with paintings, ornamental tiles or terracotta tablets. In some temples, particularly in Vishnupur in the Bankura district of West Bengal, such decorations reached a high degree of excellence.

Compare the temple shown here with that in Chapter 2.

Fig. 11 (left)
A double-roofed thatched hut.

Fig. 12 (right)
A four-roofed temple with a tower.







Fig. 13
Krishna with gopis, *terracotta plaque from the Shyamaraya temple, Vishnupur.*

Fish as Food

Traditional food habits are generally based on locally available items of food. Bengal is a riverine plain which produces plenty of rice and fish. Understandably, these two items figure prominently in the menu of even poor Bengalis. Fishing has always been an important occupation and Bengali literature contains several references to fish. What is more, terracotta plaques on the walls of temples and *viharas* (Buddhist monasteries) depict scenes of fish being dressed and taken to the market in baskets.



Fig. 14
Fish being dressed for domestic consumption, terracotta plaque from the Vishalakshi temple, Arambagh.

Brahmanas were not allowed to eat non-vegetarian food, but the popularity of fish in the local diet made the Brahmanical authorities relax this prohibition for the Bengal Brahmanas. The *Brihaddharma Purana*, a thirteenth-century Sanskrit text from Bengal, permitted the local Brahmanas to eat certain varieties of fish.

Imagine



You are a Rajput prince. How would you like your story to be told?

KEYWORDS

classical

miniature

pir

dialect

Let's recall

1. Match the following:

Anantavarman	Kerala
Jagannatha	Bengal
Mahodayapuram	Orissa
Lilatilakam	Kangra
Mangalakavya	Puri
Miniature	Kerala

2. What is Manipravalam? Name a book written in that language.

3. Who were the major patrons of Kathak?

4. What are the important architectural features of the temples of Bengal?

Let's discuss

5. Why did minstrels proclaim the achievements of heroes?

6. Why do we know much more about the cultural practices of rulers than about those of ordinary people?

7. Why did conquerors try to control the temple of Jagannatha at Puri?

8. Why were temples built in Bengal?

Let's do

9. Describe the most important features of the culture of your region, focusing on buildings, performing arts and painting.

10. Do you use different languages for (a) speaking, (b) reading, (c) writing? Find out about one major composition in language that you use and discuss why you find it interesting.

11. Choose one state each from north, west, south, east and central India. For each of these, prepare a list of foods that are commonly consumed, highlighting any differences and similarities that you notice.

12. Choose another set of five states from each of these regions and prepare a list of clothes that are generally worn by women and men in each. Discuss your findings.