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## Chapter 9

### The Making of Regional Cultures

#### ❖ The Cheras and the development of Malayalam

- The earliest record of the use of a regional language in official records in the subcontinent is found in the Chera inscriptions in Kerala in the ninth century. The language and script were Malayalam.
- Sanskrit influences on the Cheras were also prevalent. The temple theatre of Kerala and the twelfth century literary works in Malayalam were derived from Sanskrit traditions.

#### ❖ Rulers and religious traditions: The Jagannatha cult

- The cult of Jagannatha at Puri is an example of the way regional cultures grew around religious traditions. The temple was first built by Anantavarman, a ruler of the Ganga dynasty.
- Evidence in the form of wooden images of the deity carved by tribals, suggests that the deity was a local god, later identified with Vishnu.

#### ❖ The Rajputs and the traditions of heroism

- Rajputana was the conglomeration of regions in present day Rajasthan.
- Rajputs are recognised as contributing to the distinctive culture of Rajasthan.
- The cultural traditions were linked with the ideals and aspirations of rulers. The defining ideal was 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 in order to inspire other members of the community to follow them.
- Women were depicted as following their heroic husbands in both life and death. The practice of *sati* finds mention in these stories.

#### ❖ Beyond regional frontiers: The story of *Kathak*

- The term *Kathak* is derived from *katha*, which means a story in Sanskrit and other languages.
- *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.
- Under Mughal emperors and nobles, *Kathak* was performed in the court, where it acquired its present features and developed into a form of dance with a distinctive style. The main patron of *Kathak* was Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh.

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- It became popular as a dance form in north India by the nineteenth century despite disregard by the British rulers. It attained the status of a classical dance form after independence.

#### ❖ **The tradition of miniatures**

- Miniatures were small-sized paintings, done in water colour on cloth or paper.
- The earliest miniatures were on palm leaves or wood.
- Miniature artists received patronage from the Mughal emperors. Their works contained scenes from court functioning, battles or hunting and social life.
- After the decline of the Mughals, many artists moved out to various regions to receive patronage. This led to the influence of Mughal artistic styles in regions like the Rajputana and the Deccan.
- New themes from mythology and poetry were also incorporated.
- Basohli and Kangra School of miniature paintings developed in the Himalayas from the seventeenth century. Their main inspirations were the Vaishnavite traditions.

#### ❖ **A closer look : Bengal**

- **The growth of a regional language**
  - There were several stages in the evolution of the Bengali language.
  - From the fourth to the third centuries BCE, commercial ties began to develop between Bengal and Magadha, which led to the growing influence of Sanskrit.
  - The rule of the Guptas and the consequent settlement of Brahmanas strengthened the influence of the Ganga valley.
  - Between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, Bengali developed as a regional language, while Persian became the language of administration under independent Sultans and later, the Mughals.
  - The Bengali group of dialects was united by a common literary language based on the spoken language of the western part of the region, now known as West Bengal.
  - Two categories of early Bengali literature were the Sanskritic and Nath literature.
- **Pirs and temples**
  - Migration of people in the sixteenth century from western Bengal to south-eastern parts for rice cultivation brought them into contact with local fisherfolk and tribals.

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- The establishment of the Mughal capital at Dhaka accelerated the religious transformation of the area.
  - The community leaders, called *pirs*, were the source of order and stability for the early settlers. They included Sufi saints, soldiers, colonizers, Hindu and Buddhist deities and spirits.
  - Temple construction started on a large scale from the fifteenth century onwards. The structures were made of brick and terracotta.
  - The structures acquired complexities with the passage of time. These included triangular roofs, square platforms and ornamental tiles.
  - **Fish as food**
    - Fish and rice are available in plenty in the riverine plains of Bengal. Hence, these became the staple food items.
    - There were several references to fish in Bengali literature.
    - Brahmanas were prohibited to eat non-vegetarian food. However, rules were later relaxed to allow them to have fish due to its popularity in this region.