Revision Notes
Chapter – 9
The Making of Regional Cultures

- It is quite common for us to identify a region with its language. Thus, we call a person Bengali or Kannada on the basis of the language which one speaks.
- The frontiers separating regions have evolved over time and in fact are still changing.
- Regional cultures today are often the product of complex processes of intermixing of local traditions with ideas from other parts of the subcontinent.
- Every region is identified with a certain distinct type of food, clothing, poetry, dance, painting and music.

The Cheras and the Development of Malayalam:

(i) The Chera empire of Mahodayapuram, which was established in 9th century in the south-western part of Kerala introduced the Malayalam language. This is one of the earliest examples of the use of a regional language in official records in the subcontinent.

(ii) The Cheras also drew upon Sanskritic traditions. The temple theatre of Kerala, which is traced to this period, borrowed stories from the Sanskrit epics.

(iii) The first literary works in Malayalam, dated to about the twelfth century, are directly indebted to Sanskrit. 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.

Rulers and Religious Traditions: The Jagannatha Cult:

(i) In several regions, regional cultures developed around religious traditions.

(ii) The cult of Jagannatha (literally, lord of the world, a name for Vishnu) at Puri, Orissa is very famous. 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.

(iii) In the twelfth century, one of the rulers of the Ganga dynasty, Anantavarman, decided to

erect a temple for Purushottama Jagannatha at Puri.

(iv) Subsequently, in 1230, King Anangabhima III dedicated his kingdom to the deity and proclaimed himself as the “deputy” of the god.

(v) As the Jagganatha 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 to make their rule acceptable to the local people.

· **The Rajputs and Traditions of Heroism:**

(i) In the 19th century, the Rajasthan of today was called Rajputana by the British.

(ii) There are many groups who call themselves Rajputs in Northern and Central India.

(iii) From about the eighth century, most of the present-day state of Rajasthan was ruled by various Rajput families.

(iv) Prithviraj was one such ruler. These rulers cherished the ideal of the hero who fought valiantly, often choosing death on the battlefield rather than facing defeat.

(v) 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 examples.

(vi) Women were identified as the “cause” for conflicts, as men fought with one another to either “win” or “protect” women. There are stories about the practice of sati or the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands.

(vii) Those who followed the heroic ideal often had to pay for it with their lives.

· **Beyond Regional Frontiers: The Story of *Kathak*:**

(i) The heroic traditions of various regions also helped in the evolution of dance in several regions.

(ii) One such dance was Kathak, which was evolved in Northern India.

(iii) 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.

(iv) 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.

(v) Kathak developed in two traditions or gharanas: one in the courts of Rajasthan (Jaipur) and the other in Lucknow.

(vi) 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, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

(vii) Emphasis was laid on rapid footwork, elaborate costumes, as well as on the enactment of stories.

(viii) Kathak, was viewed negatively 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 six “classical” forms of dance in the country after independence.

Other dance forms that are recognized as "classical" are:

- Bharatnatyam (Tamil Nadu)
- Kathakali (Kerala)
- Odissi (Orissa)
- Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh)
- Manipuri (Manipur)

· **Paintings for Patrons: The Traditions of Miniatures**

(i) During this period, one more tradition which deserves our attention is the miniature painting. Miniatures are small sized paintings done in water colour on cloth or paper.

(ii) 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.

(iii) 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.

(iv) 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.

(v) Portraits of rulers and court scenes came to be painted, following the Mughal example.

(vi) Besides, themes from mythology and poetry were depicted at centres such as Mewar, Jodhpur, Bundi, Kota and Kishangarh.

(vii) Another area that attracted miniature paintings was the Himalayan foothills around the modern-day state of Himachal Pradesh. By the late seventeenth 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*.

(viii) By the mideighteenth century, the Kangra artists developed a style inspired by the Vaishnavite traditions. Soft colours including cool blues and greens, and a lyrical treatment of themes distinguished Kangra painting.

(ix) 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**

(i) 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.

(ii) 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.

(iii) In the seventh century, the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang observed that languages related to Sanskrit were in use all over Bengal.

(iv) From the eighth century, Bengal became the centre of a regional kingdom under the Palas.

(v) Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bengal was ruled by Sultans who were independent of the rulers in Delhi.

(vi) In 1586, when Akbar conquered Bengal, it formed the nucleus of the Bengal suba. While Persian was the language of administration, Bengali developed as a regional language.

(vii) 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 part of the modern Bengali language.

(viii) 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.
- 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.

(ix) 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.

(x) 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:**

(i) From 16th century, people migrated in large numbers from less fertile western Bengal to the forested and marshy of south-eastern Bengal.

(ii) With Mughal control over Bengal, the capital shifted to Dhaka. Officials received land grants Mosques were set up.

(iii) As they moved eastwards, they cleared forests and brought the land under rice cultivation. Gradually, local communities of fisher-folk and shifting cultivators, often tribals, merged with the new communities of peasants.

(iv) 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.

(v) Community leaders, who also functioned as teachers and adjudicators were sometimes ascribed with supernatural powers. People referred to them with affection and respect as *pirs*.

(vi) This term included saints or Sufis and other religious personalities, daring colonisers and deified soldiers, various Hindu and Buddhist deities and even animistic spirits.

(vii) Bengal also witnessed a temple-building spree from the late fifteenth century, which culminated in the nineteenth century.

(viii) 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 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.

(ix) Local deities 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.

(x) 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.

· **Fish as Food:** Bengalis had fish as food. Popularity of fish made even Bengal Brahmins eat fish.

(i) Bengal is a riverine plain which produces plenty of rice and fish.

(ii) Terracotta plaques on the walls of temples and viharas (Buddhist monasteries) depict scenes of fish being dressed and taken to the market in baskets.

(iii) The Brihaddharma Purana, a thirteenth-century Sanskrit text from Bengal, permitted the local Brahmanas to eat certain varieties of fish.