

## INDIAN HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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### Part I : EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

#### Overview

The five centuries between the demise of the Gupta Empire and the rise of the Delhi Sultanates are characterised by regionalism. Two fundamental processes seem to have driven regionalism. One was socio-economic: the gradual replacement of pastoral by agrarian economies and the shift from more fluid societies to more hierarchical ones. The other development was religio-cultural: a movement involving localised languages, temples, poets and gods. Royal patronage supported this movement and created large agrarian communities through land grants, but control of social relations and commerce was exercised by local elites. While it is difficult to attribute any causal relations between these social, economic and cultural forces, one can speculate that the increased trade with Tang China, the Arabian peninsula and Hinduised Southeast Asia enabled regions to grow wealthy without dependence on an imperial capital.

#### Events

**Royal authority** Regionalism is illustrated by the fact that between 500 and 1000 CE, over forty different lineages strove to achieve royal status. Each one of them issued inscriptions on temple walls and copper-plates that proclaimed their royal ancestry and/or promised protection to the people. Several lineages commissioned manuscripts that established their right to rule through genealogy. Some lineages succeeded in building small but efficient states, others were restricted to areas no larger than an English county, and most were frequently at war with their neighbours.

**Harsha** King Harsha (590-647 CE) was the exception. He controlled most of north India; he is the only major ruler to have converted from Hinduism to Buddhism; he wrote Sanskrit plays; and he is himself the subject of the first proper biography in Indian literature (*Harschacarita*,

‘Story of Harsha’). We know about this remarkable man from both this biography by Bana and an account written by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan Tsang), who visited Harsha’s court. Both Bana and Xuanzang describe Harsha as a model ruler. He was benevolent as well as ambitious, and grew more interested in the ideals of Mahayana Buddhism as his life progressed. He sponsored institutions to care for the poor in every region of his empire, and every four years held a conclave at which he distributed his wealth.

**Hsuan Tsang** Hsuan Tsang (Xuanzang), who was born in China in 602 and died there in 664 CE, was an exact contemporary of Harsha. And like the Indian king, this Chinese pilgrim left a considerable mark on India through his Buddhist scholarship. Following in the footsteps of his countryman Faxian, almost 400 years earlier, Hsuan Tsang travelled along the Silk Route to India to study the original Buddhist texts in the land where it originated. He reached India in 631 and spent twelve years there, visiting the places associated with the life of the Buddha. At the monastery in Nalanda, he spent more than a year learning Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. In the end, he brought back copies of about 600 texts, which he then translated into Chinese. His description of his long journey (*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*) is an unparalleled source of information on the history of north India at this time.

**Shankaracharya** Shankaracharya was a religious philosopher who lived in South India, probably in Kerala and probably in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE. He is arguably the most influential theologian in all Indian history. Tradition holds that he became a wandering ascetic at an early age, travelled north to Benares and debated with religious thinkers all over India. It was a time of fierce rivalry, and even violence, between Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. In this maelstrom Shankaracharya wrote commentaries on major Hindu texts to explicate the *advaita* or ‘non-dualism’ school of Hinduism, which claimed that beneath the flux of our impressions there is an unchanging reality. This is the *brahman*. All else is *maya* or illusion. Although he did not agree with the emotive devotionalism that was sweeping south India at the time, he did provide Hinduism with an uncompromising foundation in its battle against its rivals.

**Muslims** It would be difficult to name an event more influential in Indian history than the arrival of the Muslims in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. India had been familiar with Arabs and Persians as a result of the maritime trade between West Asia and the west coast of India in the early centuries of the Common Era. In 712, however, another kind of Arab presence came in the form of armies. By 725, Iraqi-Arabs had conquered much of western India, though not the Ganges heartland. For the time being, the conquest was halted, and the new arrivals ruled peacefully, until other Muslim populations from Central Asia entered the subcontinent about 1000 CE.

**Chalukyas** In the Deccan, several dynasties appeared after the Guptas, among whom the Vatakas, Kadambas, Gangas (also in Orissa) and Rastrakutas were prominent. The most influential, however, were the Chalukyas, a dynasty founded by Pulakeshin in 543 CE, the ruler who checked Harsha's advance to the south. The Chalukyas, who ruled most of central and western India and part of the south until well into the medieval period, were worthy successors to the imperial Guptas. Their achievements include a new style of South Indian temple architecture, literature in the Dravidian languages of Kannada and Telugu and an efficient administration of large territory.

**South India** South India was ruled by four separate kingdoms, each of whom controlled distinct territory centred on a riverine city and with access to a seaport. The Pandyas, in the far south, ruled from Madurai. The Cheras controlled the west coast. The Pallavas, in the northern Tamil territory, fought several wars with the Chalukyas in the Deccan, but neither kingdom was able to hold on to conquered territory for very long. In the end, all of these small states (except the Cheras) were defeated by the Cholas.

**Cholas** Of the dozen or so major kingdoms that arose in South India between about 500 and 900 CE, the Cholas were the most influential. We can view the Cholas (9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. CE) as the south Indian equivalent of the north Indian Guptas (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Through extensive maritime trade, the wealthy Cholas were great patrons of the arts, especially temple-based traditions of music, dance, song and recitation of myths. Again similar to their predecessors, the Cholas used religion and conspicuous rituals, this time the cult of Siva, to legitimise political power. Having conquered the outlying lands of neighbouring kingdoms, the Cholas established themselves at Tanjore in the fertile Kaveri River

basin in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. Under Raja Raja Chola I (r. 985-1014 CE) and his son, Rajendra Chola I (r. 1014-1044 CE) this Tamil kingdom extended its influence up the east coast to Bengal, through the interior to the Ganges valley, across the Palk Strait to Sri Lanka and over the seas to Southeast Asia.

### Government

**Harsha** Although Harsha's kingdom was exceptional in terms of the extent of territory, its administration illustrates the political regionalism of the time. As with the other kingdoms in the south and on the edges of the Gangetic heartland, territory was defined less by administration than by language and sectarian affiliations. Boundaries were fluid. Although texts continued to use the old rhetoric of a central power, new political, linguistic, religious and literary boundaries were emerging. Indeed, the formal control of the state did not extend much beyond the Gangetic plain. Instead the state was held together by using land-grants to create alliances with local elites (called *mahasamanta*), leaving conquered rulers on their thrones, and contenting itself with tribute and homage. Contemporaneous texts list six different levels of vassals in Harsha's administration. One inscribed copper-plate dated 632 CE records a gift of land to two Brahmins and lists several vassals as guarantors of the gift.

**Feudalism?** Were these local elites similar to the feudal vassals of medieval European kings? As with their European counterparts, these Indian elites were permitted nearly total autonomy in their locality and probably provide their overlords with military service. But it would be wrong to assume that, like European vassals, these Indian elites held their land-grants in lieu of salaries. In fact, the Indian elites were territorial rulers in their own right, though on a limited scale. They held land, either by inheritance or conquest, independently of the grant from the centre. It seems likely that the land-grants were actually a method by which the king extended his circle of subordinates, as a display of his power.

**Chola** The Chola kingdom is an even clearer example of local autonomy co-existing with imperial authority. The small unit of government was the *nadu*, or locality, usually comprising several villages. The Chola kingdom contained several hundred *nadus*, of

varying size, suggesting that they were not artificially created by the state but were pre-existing units of local government. Each *nadu* had its own council, who were responsible for land assessment and tax collection. Although not appointed by the king, the local council passed on a portion of these taxes to the king's representative at the *nadu*-level. Each *nadu* incorporated one or more *nagarams*, which were market towns and commercial centres. The *nagaram* was managed by a committee of merchants, who collectively owned land and collected taxes from peasants working that land. On top of this local, indigenous government, the Chola rulers created an administrative supra-unit of the *valanadu* (or 'mega-nadu'), controlled by officers appointed by the court. Inscriptions mention four different officers, who were involved in revenue collection, land surveying and military operations. There were two grades of administrators, and the offices tended to be hereditary. The legal system was administered through a system of royal courts acting in liaison with village courts and caste panchayats. In addition to land tax, with four different categories depending on the fertility of the land, there were taxes on goods in transit, houses and professions.

**Military** Chola conquests on land and on sea were enabled by a large and well-organised standing army. The king was the commander-in-chief, followed by three ranks of officers and dozens of regiments. Soldiers wore metal armour and used spears, bows and arrows and shields. The army also had hundreds of horses and elephants. The famous victories in the Bay of Bengal and the Java Sea were possible because the Chola navy had hundreds of ships at its disposal, many equipped with weapons.

### Economy

**Agriculture** Cultivation displaced pastoralism and rivalled urban-based commerce for economic power. The spread of agriculture was made possible not only by forest clearance but also by improved irrigation, which, in turn, enabled a wider variety of crops. In South India, where intensive wet-rice agriculture dominated, rulers built large tanks (or reservoirs), dug deep wells and created a system of canals to bring water from the major rivers to fields. The Persian wheel was instrumental in all these projects.

**Land** The system of land grants, at the heart of regionalism, meant a loss of revenue for the state. But this loss could be offset against the gain in the allegiance of local elites, either landowners or temples. From

inscriptions, scholars have detected a strengthening of individual property rights and a resultant juxtaposition of large-scale landholding with small-scale peasant production. Peasant cultivators had no rights to the land and were transferred with the land when it was sold or transferred to a new owner. Peasants were obliged to pay taxes to the state or to the landowner, and sometimes to both. The state typically claimed one-sixth of the produce, but sometimes raised this to one-quarter.

**Money** Some scholars have argued, and others have disagreed, that there was a steep decline in the use of metallic coins in the post-Gupta era in north India. It does appear that there was a shift from gold to silver, and from these two metals to a debased coin using copper to add weight. We do have evidence of an increasing use of cowrie shells, especially in long-distance maritime trade. Overall, it seems that whatever the decrease in metal coinage, it occurred mainly in the interior areas of north India.

**Temples** Temples, especially in South India, became much more than places of worship. With kings, landowners and merchant as patrons, and artisans, ritual specialists and accountants as employees, temples became major centres of economic activity. Kings legitimised their authority by building and patronising temple complexes, such as the great structures at Kanchipuram and Tanjore. Landowners and merchants asserted their status by making donations of land to the temple, the revenue from which was earmarked for the performance of a ritual or maintenance of a shrine. A copper-plate from about 850 CE records the gift of 90 sheep by a merchant to a temple. Another copper-plate mentions a donation of 30 copper coins by a merchant's wife for the maintenance of a temple lamp. Buddhist monasteries played a similar economic role, though less conspicuously.

**Production** New technologies improved production in various sectors. For example, the earlier hand mill for pressing oil from seeds was replaced by a bullock-driven mill, which was far more efficient. Larger and more easily worked looms were built, which produced goods for the increasing domestic and foreign markets in woven silk, linen, calico, wool and cotton. The same is true for pearls, ivory, sandalwood gold

and semi-precious stones. The now-famous spice trade, primarily in pepper, developed as well.

**Maritime Trade** Chola rulers set up a string of fortified trading towns along the east coast to facilitate growing maritime trade. Much of the Indian influence in Southeast Asia, evident in the Buddhist and Hindu temples in Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia (especially Bali and Java), and in the names of kings, can be attributed to South India and largely to the Cholas. The Chola maritime campaigns to Sri Lanka and Indonesia were probably intended to control trade routes as much as to conquer territory. Maritime merchants became wealthy on the back of this trade and formed powerful associations that rivalled kingdoms. One guild based in the Deccan (The Five Hundred Lords of Ayyavole) spread over the whole of South India and left inscriptions in their name in Southeast Asia.

### Society

**Local bodies** A significant trend during this period was the growth in numbers and power of local corporate bodies. These groups included rural councils (*nadu*), town councils (*nagaram*), landowning associations, merchants' guilds and Brahmin assemblies (*sabha*). Some of these groups forged alliances with each other, making them in effect rulers of a region. In South India, there was a unique alliance between these unofficial rulers and Brahmins. Land grants from the time record donations of large tracts of land from these powerful groups to Brahmins. Such gifts were often given to persuade Brahmins to settle in an interior area, where the newly-powerful group had built a temple. These settlements, with a hundred or more Brahmin families, were called *brahmadeyas*. They were usually located near a temple and were governed by an assembly, which oversaw revenues from temple-owned land, management of that land and conduct of the Brahmin community.

**Stratification** Throughout this period, the ancient four-fold Vedic caste system held firm and in some cases became more rigid. Social space and movement, for instance, became more restricted. In south Indian towns and villages, caste-specific quarters appeared. A detailed study of inscriptions found seven different quarters: for landowners, cultivators, people who control the canal irrigation system, artisans,

temple servants, toddy tappers and untouchables. Some people who had no caste designation were brought into the system when their forest or hilly territory was cleared and cultivated. Now, these relatively egalitarian tribal and forest populations were designated as a new sub-caste of untouchables.

**Transformation** At the same time, the social system was not entirely rigid and transformations did occur. Within the sudra category, for example, landowning sub-castes (*jatis*) gained in status, while some cultivator sub-castes became landless labourers. In South India, the groups who seemed to have risen in status were traders in ghee and seafaring merchants and weavers. By the end of the period, silk weavers began to invest in and own land.

**Sanskritisation** In both north and south India, social change occurred through a process known as 'Sanskritisation.' Low castes, mainly *sudra* landowners who had grown wealthy, assumed the trappings of royalty, took on royal titles, commissioned scribes to invent genealogies with ancient pedigrees and hired Brahmins to conduct rituals in their temples. In the north, low castes followed this route to become recognised as 'Rajputs' ('Son of a Raja), the warrior or *ksatriya* caste. In the south, it was arriviste peasant groups (*sudras*) who propelled themselves up the ladder into *ksatriya* status.

## Culture

**Architecture** The rock-cut temples, stupas and prayer-halls at Ellora (c. 600-1000 CE) represent a continuation of those same Hindu and Buddhist structures carved earlier at Ajanta, in the same region of western India. In particular, the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora dedicated to Siva is impressive. It was carved out a single rock face, starting from the top and working down. It has a courtyard, a tower, a central shrine, five minor shrines and a columned arcade three stories high, with alcoves and sculpted panels. Soon these rock-cave structures gave way to free-standing ones, although both rock-cut and free-standing temples are seen at Mahabalipuram (c. 700 CE). Free-standing temples were built according to conventions laid down in canonical texts (*sastras*), the most important being that the overall design was a symbolic representation of the universe. Temples were largely built with



stone, although brick and mortar continued to be used in areas where stone was not readily available. The earliest (and still magnificent) temples were built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE at Aihole and Badami in the Deccan. By the end of the period, several other distinct regional styles had developed, in the far south (Tamil Nadu), on the west coast (Kerala), on the east coast (Orissa) and in Bengal. Late Buddhist architecture is represented by the great monastery at Nalanda (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and the hall at Bodh Gaya (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

**Sculpture** Outstanding examples of early Hindu sculpture are seen on both the rock-cut and free-standing temples at Mahabalipuram and the caves at Ajanta and Ellora. Further developments in stone sculpting of Hindu gods and goddesses are seen on the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital, not far from Madras. The 'lost wax' method of bronze casting had been known in the Indus Valley Civilisation (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE), but it reached perfection in the figures sculpted in South India at the end of this period. Artisans patronised by Chola kings produced bronze figures of deities and rulers with remarkable plasticity and subtlety.

**Painting** Continuity with the earlier tradition of wall painting is seen in the exquisite images depicted on the walls and ceilings of rock-cut temples at Ellora. Some of the most beautiful images are of graceful *apsaras*, female spirits of air and water in Indian mythology. Although the paintings have deteriorated, copies made both by hand and camera in the 19<sup>th</sup> century provide us with a good idea of their original beauty.

**Religion** The second historic shift in Indian religion (after the turn to contemplation in the Upanishads) was the development of a devotionalism known as *bhakti* ('to share in', 'to belong to'). Characterised by an intense and personal attachment to a particular god or goddess, saint or guru, devotionalism illustrates well the regionalism of the period. Until the bhakti movement, religious thought had been expressed only in Sanskrit, the preserve of ritual specialists and court poets. Then, beginning in about 500 CE in the Tamil country, religious poetry, myth and song were composed and sung in the languages of common people. Favoured by royal patronage, the movement spread across the face of the subcontinent and has been the life-blood of Hinduism ever since. Even Buddhism, which the bhakti poets 'sang out

of India,' was affected by devotionalism. New Mahayana figures, such as bodhisattvas (Avalokitesvara and Maitreya) and goddesses (Padmini and Tara) were worshipped in shrines and with rituals similar to those in Hinduism.

**Sanskrit literature** Sanskrit literature did not hit the heights it had achieved in the previous period, but poets and playwrights continued to produce individual pieces of excellence, especially in the *mahakavya* genre. Notable writers include Magha, Bhatti, Bharavi and Bana (all probably 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE), who wrote poems based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics. Bana is also important as the author of the first biography in Indian literature, *Harschacarita* or 'Story of King Harsha.'

**Tamil literature** As mentioned above, devotional poetry was first composed in Tamil, the oldest of the regional languages with a literary history that stretches back to about 100 CE. A group of poets called the Nayanmars ('Servants of the Lord Siva') composed and sang thousands of hymns that typically focused on a specific form of Siva or on a specific Siva temple. Some of these poems have a raw, wounded quality, often literally in the description of bodily mortification. Sometimes that poetic ferocity is directed against Jains and Buddhists, who had considerable influence in South India. At roughly the same time, another group of Tamil poets sang in praise of Visnu. They were known as the Alvars (lit. 'Deep Ones') because they immersed themselves in Visnu. Their hymns to Visnu (the preserver) are predictably less fierce in tone than those to Siva (the destroyer), less visceral in imagery and less uncompromising in sectarian loyalty. The Alvar's approach to Visnu is a mixture of contemplation, mythological drama and rapturous love. Many of these poets, in both groups, became objects of worship themselves. Finally, two Tamil epics (*Cilapattikaram* and *Manimekalai*) were also composed in this period, the first by a Jain and the second by a Buddhist.

### Reading

Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)  
K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India* (Oxford, Delhi, 2000)

Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)  
Romila Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Penguin, 2002),  
Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Columbia, 1988),  
F.R. Allchin, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States* (Cambridge, 1995)  
A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)

### Questions/Discussion

1. A broad process of regionalism features in political, social and cultural spheres during this period. In general, it involved the gradual strengthening of local autonomy over a centralised state. While this process is widespread in world history, the Indian variant was driven by language. Look at the rise of regional languages (and scripts) in this period, and then compare that with the fragmentation of newly-Independent India into linguistic states in the 1950s and 1960s.
2. Devotionalism dominates this period of Indian history. Poets, singers, mystics and saints expressed a new kind of relationship between people and gods. Although this personal, emotional and painful bond was articulated first in the Sanskrit text of the *Bhagavad Gita*, it flowered in the regional languages of India from about 500 CE onward. Map the geographical spread of this religious-cultural movement from Tamil to Assamese, by identifying key texts and poets.
3. The nature of historical research on this period differs from that of preceding periods because between 500 and 1000 CE we have thousands of inscriptions. Prior to 500 CE, we have some inscriptions, but most writing was in the form of literary texts. From 3500 BCE onward, we also have an extensive collection of material remains. Compare these three main types of evidence—inscriptions, literary texts and material remains—for the role they play in our reconstruction of Indian history.

4. Analyse the advent of Islam in India, both by sea and by land in this period. How did those two arrivals differ and what consequences did those differences have for the local populations they encountered? Describe also how Indian Islam differed from Islam in its Arab and Persian heartlands.

### Texts

1. A Tamil poem in praise of Visnu (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE), trans. A.K. Ramanujan, 1982

We here and that man, this man,  
and that other-in-between,  
and that woman, this woman,  
and that other, whoever,  
those people, and these,  
and these others-in-between,  
this thing, that thing,  
and this other-in-between, whichever,  
all things dying, these, things,  
those things, those others-in-between,  
good things, bad things,  
things that were, that will be,  
being all of them,  
he stands there.

[Note: 'He' in the last line refers to Visnu. Each of the Tamil personal pronouns ('he,' 'she,' and 'it') has three forms: 1) for near the speaker, 2) far away and 3) in the middle. There is also a distinction between 'we' (inclusive) and 'we' (exclusive)].

1. From a Chola king's temple inscription (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

Hail! Prosperity! There was engraved on stone, as orally settled, the revenue in paddy, which has to be measured by the measure (marakkāl) called (after) Adavallan, which is equal to a rājakēsari measure, and the gold and money, which has to be paid from the land paying taxes; and there was also engraved on stone the non-taxable land, including the village-site, the sacred temples, the ponds(kulam), the channels(vāykkāl) passing through the villages, the quarter for Paraiyas, the quarter for Kammalas, and the burning

ground, in the villages, which the lord Sri Rajarajadeva had given in the Chola country (maṇḍalam), and in other countries as divine gifts for the expenses required by the supreme lord of the sacred stone-temple, called Sri Rajarajesvara, which the lord Sri Rajarajadeva has caused to be built at Tanjavur....

2. From an inscription by a merchants' guild (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

Famed throughout the world, adorned with many good qualities, truth, purity, good conduct, policy, condescension, and prudence; protectors of the law of the heroic traders, having 32 *veloma* [?], 18 cities, 64 *yoga – pithas* [sacred places], and ashrams at the four points of the compass; born to be wanderers over many countries, the earth as their sack, ... the serpent race as the cords, the betel pouch as a secret pocket, the horizon as their light; ... by land routes and water routes penetrating into the regions of the six continents, with superior elephants, well-bred horses, large sapphires, moon-stones, pearls, rubies, diamonds... cardamoms, cloves, sandal, camphor musk, saffron and other perfumes and drugs; by selling which wholesale, or hawking about on their shoulders, preventing the loss by customs duties, they fill up the emperor 's treasury of gold, his treasury of jewels, and his armoury of weapons; and from the rest they daily bestow gifts on pandits and munis; white umbrellas as their canopy, the mighty ocean as their moat, Indra as the hand-guard [of their swords], Varuna as the standard - bearer, Kubera as the treasurer, the nine planets as a belt ... the sun and moon as the backers, the 33 gods as the spectators; like the elephant they attack and kill, like the cow they stand and kill, like the serpent, they kill with poison; like the lion they spring and kill ... they make fun of the gone Mari [last epidemic] ... clay they set fire to, of sand they make ropes; the thunderbolt they catch and exhibit; the sun and moon they draw down to earth...

## Part II : LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview

It would be difficult to exaggerate the depth and longevity of the changes set in motion by the Muslim conquest and rule of India. The horse-riding warrior elite from Central Asia and northern Afghanistan overran most of north India, the Deccan and even a portion of the far south. With Delhi as their capital, but Persia as their background influences, the Sultans introduced a new system of government, of warfare and of taxation. The Sultan's court at Delhi, and those of minor rulers in the Deccan, patronised poets and artisans who brought Persian literary culture and architecture to the subcontinent. Sufism, the mystical and emotional school of Islam, also spread throughout India, often blending in with Hindu devotionalism. However, Muslim rule also brought warfare, destruction and social upheaval to many part of the countryside. The divisions and distrust were only finally resolved by the partition of India in the mid twentieth century.

### Events

**Mahmud of Ghazni** A largely peaceful co-existence had existed between Muslim rulers and local communities in western and northern India since the first arrival of Arab Muslims in 712 CE. This stability was shattered by the incursions of Mahmud of Ghazni carried out between 1000-1025 CE. Mahmud represented a different kind of Muslim. His father was a Turkish slave (*mamluk*), a Central Asian given training for the fight against the Mongols. In 998 CE, Mahmud became Sultan of Ghazni (near Kabul), a province of the Persian Empire which his father had captured. From this northern outpost, Mahmud carried out his annual raids into north India, reaching as far as the Ganges. Notoriously, he plundered Hindu temples, bringing back to Ghazni a vast treasure of gold, which ironically made his capital a target for another group of Turkic Muslims who conquered Ghazni in 1151.

**Sultanate** Other Muslim invaders led to series of five unrelated Turkic and Afghan rulers known collectively as the Delhi Sultanate (1206 to 1526 CE). The first of these was the so-called 'Slave' or Mamluk dynasty (1206-1290), which defeated the Ghorid rulers, took over northwest India and established their capital at Delhi. The Mamluks were followed by the Khalji dynasty (1290-1320), the Tughluq dynasty (1320-1415), the Sayyid dynasty (1415-1451) and lastly the Lodi dynasty

(1451-1526), who were defeated by the Mughals (Mongols). From about 1300 onward, smaller Muslim states that broke away from Delhi were established in the Deccan.

**Delhi** At the centre of this turmoil, was Delhi, capital of the Sultanate. Once a minor fortified town, it became a sprawling metropolis, which would remain the capital of every (north) Indian ruler until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the British established Calcutta as theirs. With its magnificent tombs, mosques and forts, it commanded the heartland of India and was a target for any would-be usurper. In 1299, Mongols conquered parts of Delhi but failed to destroy its fortifications and were driven out. Another, large assault launched in 1307-08 was repulsed. Timur (Tamerlane) sacked Delhi in 1398, destroying many of its buildings and unleashing a bloodbath on its streets. However, he had no intention of remaining in India and returned to Central Asia. Delhi recovered, though it had been shattered, and regained its confidence.

**Conquest** The Muslim conquest of India was rapid and relentless. By the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, the rulers in Delhi had established sultanates in the Deccan and then pushed into the deep south, where they briefly controlled the Pandyan capital of Madurai. In attempting to explain these conquests, historians have rightly pointed to the military superiority, ferocity and audacity of the Central Asian horsemen. In addition, the prospect of looting the riches of the subcontinent, of gaining status and winning a military career, were strong incentives for soldiers who typically came from low status groups. But another factor in the spectacular collapse of the India was the internecine war between Rajputs and their rivals for supremacy in the Gangetic heartland.

**Amir Khusrau** The life and writings of Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) reflect the major historical developments of this period. It is through him (and others) that Persian literary culture, tinged with Sufism, was brought to India. His father was a Turkic officer from Central Asia, who came to Delhi at the request of the Sultan in 1220s and was granted land. The young Amir Khusrau found favour in the Delhi court, where he became a prolific and popular writer. His *gaza* compositions are still regarded as the finest in this genre. In addition to writing odes, riddles and legends, some of which are still studied today, he is credited with developing the influential *qawwali* genre of devotional song by fusing Persian and Indian music traditions.

**Muhammad Tughlaq** Muhammad Tughlaq (r. 1324-1351 CE) was one of the most curious figures of the Delhi Sultanate. He was a polymath, accomplished in Persian poetry and Islamic philosophy. He also studied mathematics, medicine and astronomy. An ambitious ruler, he extended the territory of Muslim rule to its greatest extent and instituted bold administrative reforms. But he also made two catastrophic decisions. He suddenly moved the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad in the Deccan, forcing the entire court, army and their retinues to trek thousands of miles into a barren landscape, where the lack of water forced him to reverse his decision and bring everyone back two years later. Another decision, to glorify his achievements with gold and silver coinage, proved a financial disaster and brought down his government.

**Vijayanagar kingdom** The advance of Muslim rule in the south was only checked by the rise of the Vijayanagar kingdom (1336–1565 CE). The capital city (Vijayanagar, 'City of Victory') was a vast complex of temples (and mosques) that displayed wealth and ambition, but the kings gained their control by a skilful network of alliances with adjacent Hindu and minor Muslim rulers. They even improved their army by recruiting Muslim soldiers and borrowing their techniques of warfare. And when the Portuguese arrived on the west coast of India in 1498, they were quick to enter into treaty and trade arrangements with them, too.

## Government

**Administration** The early Delhi Sultanate adapted a Persian model of government, making it more militaristic and aristocratic. The sultan was nominally the head of all aspects of government, although in practice he had a number of ministers who were responsible. His second-in-command was the Wazir, who headed the finance department and acted as head of the civil service. Next in importance came the Diwan-i-ariz, who was in charge of the military, responsible for recruitment and discipline in the army. The Diwan-i-insha was the chief secretary to the sultan and in charge of all royal correspondence. Three other ministers were responsible for foreign affairs, religious affairs and judicial affairs. The provinces were ruled by military officers (*muqti*) and noblemen who were given land rent-free (*iqtadar*), both of whom were appointed by the Sultan. Provinces were divided into districts (*shiq*), which were subdivided into group of villages (*paragana*).



**Reforms** This basic structure was reformed by Sultan Alauddin (r. 1296-1316 CE) in order to extend central authority over his expanded territory. Following his successful defence of Delhi against two Mongol campaigns (1299, 1307-08), he conquered new territory in Gujarat and Rajasthan before driving deep into the south and taking the ancient Hindu city of Madurai in 1310. Thereafter, Alauddin undertook a massive land survey on the basis of which a standard tax was levied. Half the crop from arable land and a fixed tax on all herded animals was due to the centre, to be collected by military officers in the provinces and stored in state granaries. The net effect was to raise more revenue and to reduce the authority of local elites, who also faced new taxes on their horses, clothing and houses. Old ruling families, however, were permitted to retain their symbolic power as tributaries to Delhi. In effect, however, Delhi governed the countryside from a few garrisoned cities and plundered whenever the need arose. Most of these reforms were reversed by Alauddin's successor, Muhammad Tughluq (r.1324-1351 CE), who instituted a new department of agriculture dedicated to expanding arable land. He also reorganised the revenue department and demanded reports from provincial officers, showing income and expenditure. And he moved the capital (temporarily) to the Deccan so that the centre, through its officers and its army, had more control over the provinces.

**Military** The rapid and near-total conquest of India by the Delhi Sultanate emphasises the sometimes overlooked role of warfare as a factor in shaping Indian history. The military superiority of the Turkic and Afghan armies was considerable. Unlike their Hindu opponents, these soldiers could shoot arrows while riding a horse. It was said that a good horseman could shoot six arrows a minute. Some of them also used a cross bar to launch arrows that could penetrate metal armour. These skills came naturally to the warriors from Central Asia, where (unlike in India) the climate and topography was conducive to horse breeding. Muslim armies also used war-elephants, to batter down fortifications and to scatter soldiers on a battlefield. The Sultans owned thousands of these animals, which also became a symbol of royal power.

### Economy

**Growth** Under the Delhi Sultanate, the centralisation and standardisation of government, especially in tax collection and land management, contributed to an expanding economy. An efficient state bureaucracy extended the monetised economy into rural areas. Textile

production was improved by the introduction of the wooden cotton gin, spinning wheel and treadle loom (all probably from Persia). The discovery (or borrowing) of sericulture techniques led to a growth in luxury textiles, such as silk. Carpet weaving, again from Persia, also flourish and created new wealth for weavers and traders. Paper manufacturing was introduced, probably in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. CE, and became so popular that sweet-sellers in Delhi could wrap their goods in paper. Increased trade, especially in gems, horses and fine textiles, led to rising standards of living for artisans and merchants.

**Slavery** While it is difficult to say what contribution slave labour made to economic growth, there is no doubt that slave labour was extensively used in the construction of major buildings (including the famous mosques and tombs), roads, wells and canals. Contemporary accounts claim that the sultans owned between 50,000 -180,000 slaves. Slave markets are described in Delhi, where a man could be bought for less than the cost of a horse. Everyone seems to have had at least one slave, and many of them worked in the textile and construction industries.

**Money-grant system** Like virtually all previous rulers of India, the Delhi Sultanate used the land-grant system as a means to create allies in the provinces. However, a problem arose when the state enlarged its territory beyond its ability to assert its authority and local elites became too independent. This is the problem the sultans of Delhi attempted to solve by introducing the money-grant system. As the name indicates, it awarded money, not land, and it reversed the direction of the award. Some of the land tax revenue to the state was awarded to a provincial official, usually the military governor, for their maintenance and that of their subordinates. These money-grants evolved into hereditary emoluments, providing the officers with considerable land and power in the countryside. The result was that the office-holders became financially independent from Delhi, reproducing the very problem the system was intended to solve. At the same time, the officers failed to build alliances with the old, aristocratic Hindu families, thus exacerbating existing tensions between Muslim rulers and the countryside.

**Currency** Although bills of exchange were used to transfer debt and make land sales in the countryside, the main currency was coinage. The amount of coins minted during the Sultanate was considerably greater than during any previous period. Metal coins (mostly silver and silver-alloyed, and some gold) were issued by the various rulers of the Sultanate. The most common coin was the silver-based *tanka*, which had 14 different denominations, determined by the weight of silver. Over the course of the Sultanate, the amount of silver decreased from about 30% in the beginning to only 5% by the end. In effect, the economy became demonetised. Once again, Sultan Muhammad Tughluq's radical reforms contributed to the problem. In order to facilitate remittances from across his newly-enlarged empire, he set up mints in seven different locations. Then he changed the medium of tax collection from grain to coins. However, when he discovered that the available gold and silver was inadequate, he issued coins in copper and brass. These debased coins, with an inscription but no royal seal, were easily copied and the market was flooded with fakes. Soon the revenue system collapsed, and with it the Sultan's rule.

### Society

**Newcomers** People of various ethnicities had entered India before 1000 CE, but they had come in small numbers and were easily assimilated on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The Muslim newcomers, however, were very different. They were rulers and hardened warriors, low status men who had risen to power through military prowess and ambition. They injected an egalitarian dynamic and social mobility into a society structured by ancient texts and Hindu practices. The populist ideology of Sufi Islam also contributed to this openness; some Sufi poets were low status but gained wide recognition. Disruption was also caused by the Sultan granting land to Muslim officers and noblemen in the countryside, which resulted in the partial replacement of a rural ruling class of landed Hindu families by an urban-linked Muslim ruling class.

**Muslim-Hindu relations** Relations between the two groups varied by region and circumstance. The usurpation of power by newly-arrived Muslim noblemen and onerous taxation fuelled discontent in many localities. But many other Muslim rulers were tolerated as long as they did not disrupt local customs. On the other hand, Hindus were almost completely shut out of public employment. Some Muslim rulers did raze temples and destroy idols, but this was far from common. What is

remarkable is that no incident of armed uprising, or organised opposition of any kind, is known. It would appear, then, that the expansion of Islam was not the result of forced conversion, though isolated examples did occur. Rather, the religion was adopted by many Hindus in towns and cities as a practical step to success. Among those groups who converted in large numbers were artisans, who were in great demand. What is unknown is how many Untouchables were attracted by the egalitarianism of Islam and converted. Certainly the Sufi saints, who wandered in the countryside, spoke a message that would have appealed to low-status groups. The status of women declined, however, as they found their public social space restricted. The practice of *purdah* (from the Persian *parda*, 'veil' or 'curtain'), spread but only partly in imitation of Muslim practice.

**Synthesis** Whatever their motives, it is certainly true that Muslims and Hindus did interact and created a synthesis in several key aspects of social life. One telling example is that the betel leaf (*pan*) soon became a favourite of Muslims, who also adopted Indian spices in their cooking. Muslims. Many Muslim men and women began to wear versions of local clothes and ornaments, and their weddings and funerals showed definite Indian influences. Literary genres mixed, as in the popular *qawwali*, and languages comingled, producing a tongue with Sanskrit grammar and Persian vocabulary. At the level of folk religion, Hinduism and Islam were virtually identical.

## Culture

**Indo-Islamic architecture** The sultans of Delhi, and the minor Muslim rulers in the Deccan, oversaw the development of an Indo-Islamic style of architecture, characterised by ornate and intricately designed arches and domes. Pillars, mosques and tombs were decorated with floral patterns and calligraphic inscriptions from the Qur'an. The royal tombs of the Lodi sultans are an excellent illustration of this style. The most famous structure, however, is the [Qutub Minar](#), a pillar standing 73 metres high at centre of a large complex of buildings, including tombs and mosques on the outskirts of Delhi. Made of brick but covered with metal and later enlarged by adding six storeys made of sandstone and marble, the Qutub Minar is an architectural metaphor for the Sultanate as a whole. Begun in 1192, it was struck by lightning, damaged by an earthquake, repaired and added to throughout the period, reaching its present condition in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**Hindu architecture** Some of the most magnificent Hindu temples in India were also built in the early centuries of this period. Regional styles evolved in Bengal, Kerala and Orissa, but the most spectacular temples were constructed in the far south. A large open space, often with a pool of water, was enclosed by a square, with high towers on each of four walls. Outstanding examples are the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram and the Brihadishvara temple at Tanjore, both in modern-day Tamil Nadu.

**Sculpture** The quality of sculpture in north India declined during the Sultanate and produced a predominance of massive, rigid forms. However, a subtle school of bronze sculpture developed in eastern India, as seen in the images of Buddhist gods and goddesses at Nalanda and Kurkihar. In the south, the tradition of exquisite Chola bronzes (made with the 'lost-wax' method) continued to produce excellent pieces.

**Hindu literature** Hindu literature during this period was inspired by the devotionalism that had begun in the Tamil-speaking region of the south a few centuries earlier. The new literary-religious impulse spread to the adjacent Kannada-speaking area, where in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE a group of poets invented a new genre of the *vacana* ('speech'), with which to speak to Siva. Known as Virasaivas ('Militant/Heroic Saivas'), they used this simple verse form to propagate their spiritual vision and egalitarian social ideals. In Tamil, the outstanding literary achievement was a devotional retelling of the Ramayana by Kampan (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE?). Another Ramayana of equal iconic status in the north was written in Hindi by Tulsi Das (15<sup>th</sup> c. CE). In Sanskrit, the prevailing devotionalism is best illustrated by the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

**Indo-Persian literature** A new literary culture developed at the court of the Delhi Sultanate and the court of the so-called Deccan sultanates. The wealth and fame of these rulers attracted poets from the eastern reaches of the Persian Empire and stimulated local talent, as well. Writing in Persian, but often incorporating Indian themes and metres, these poets experimented with Indo-Persian genres, such as the *qasida* (panegyric ode) and the *masnavi* (rhymed couplets mixing romantic love and moral instruction). But the pre-eminent genre, in both Persia and India, was the *gazel*, a short lyric of rhymed couplets combining the

conventions of a love poem with those of a drinking song. Its imagery is drawn almost entirely from the landscape, flora and fauna of Persia, the most famous example being the contrast between the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). A subtle poetic language is made even more enigmatic by the Sufi religious themes that supply the content. Many *gazals* express emotions of longing and loss, in both ordinary human experience and the mystical experience of God. A master of many genres, including the *ghazal*, was Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE), who is also credited with developing the influential *qawwali* genre by fusing Persian and Indian music traditions.

**Story of the Parrot** The 'Story of the Parrot' (*Tuti Nama*), written by Nakhshabi in the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, epitomises the cultural interaction of this period. Nakhshabi was a poet and physician born in Persia who migrated to north India and found patronage under a minor Muslim ruler. While still in Persia, he had translated a Sanskrit version of the story (*Sukasaptati*, 'Story of 70 Parrots'), which he later adapted as the *Tuti Nama*. In his text, a single parrot tells 52 tales over as many nights in order to prevent its mistress from having a love affair while her husband is away (a delaying tactic of storytelling that is familiar to us from the *Thousand and One Nights*).

## Religion

**Islam** Early Indian Islam was guided by the Koran and the Sunna, which tradition held were the words and principles of the Prophet. Thus, the Islam practiced in Delhi in this period would have differed little from that observed in Baghdad or Damascus. There were minor differences, however, especially in the interpretation of Islamic law (*shariah*), resulting from a recognition that adjustments had to be made when Islam conquered people of different faiths.

**Sufism** Islam during the Delhi Sultanate was also tempered by the Sufis, the wandering Muslim mystics who took their name from the coarse wool tunic they wore. Sufis represented the ecstatic impulse suppressed in legalistic schools of Islam and expressed in their statement: 'Mystics learn from God; scholars learn from books.' Although Islam held that the only path to Paradise was unwavering faith in God, Sufi saints believed that one could draw closer to God during

one's lifetime and thereby experience mystical oneness. As singers and poets, they helped to spread Islam through the countryside, in a way that traditional Islamic teachers could not. The Sufi poet-saints were virtually indistinguishable from the poet-saints of devotional Hinduism. Both groups sang of a direct, personal contact with the divine, a power that they believed transcended petty social categories like caste and religious identity.

**Hinduism** Devotionalism, which had begun centuries earlier in the Tamil country, spread like wild fire across the entire subcontinent. Hindu poet-saints composed songs in Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Assamese that sang the praises of deities in the language of common people. The Chola kingdom in the far south and the Vijayanagar kingdom in the Deccan provided the patronage to promote the worship of Visnu and Siva in large temple and local shrines. The philosopher Ramanuja (c. 1017–1137 CE) established a theological basis for devotionalism with his school of *Vishistadvaita* ('qualified non-dualism'). He explained that a worshipper need not merge into oneness with god (the goal of the rival *Advaita*, or non-dualism, school). Instead, the worshipper would become immersed in god, but retain a personal identity that could form a bond with god.

### Reading

George Michell and Mark Zebrowski, *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates* (Cambridge, 1999)

George Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India* (Cambridge, 1995)

Axel Michaels, *Hinduism. Past and Present* (Princeton, 2004)

Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton, 2009)

Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh, 1969)

Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge, 2005)

Richard Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761* (Cambridge, 2006)

Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur:1300-1700* (Princeton, 1978)  
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (Columbia,1988)

### Discussion/questions

1. The mosque is the best-known Indo-Islamic architectural form, but the tomb garden is perhaps the most unique. Analyse the tomb garden by studying its precedents in Arab, Persian and Central Asian cultures, its counterparts (if any) in pre-Islamic India and its cultural significance during the Delhi Sultanate and later.
2. Identify the factors that explain the spread of Muslim rule across north India and the Deccan. What relationship do you find between military success and cultural assimilation? How can you explain that fact that, in many cases, local Hindu populations under a Muslim ruler did not change their traditional culture?
3. Analyse the Indo-Persian synthesis that emerged in this period, especially in Delhi. What are the elements of this synthesis? Why did Persian come to be the court language? Assess the role of a court language by comparing Persian in Delhi with a court language elsewhere (such as Arabic in Cairo, Mandarin in Beijing or French in Paris).
4. What role did the Vijayanagar Empire play in this period? Identify its origins, trace its development and explain why it became a powerful symbol of Hindu culture then and in later centuries.

### Texts

1. Kannada poem by Basavanna (c. 1105-1167 CE), trans. A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

The rich will make temples for Siva.  
What shall I, a poor man, do?  
My legs are pillars,  
the body the shrine,  
the head a cupola of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,  
things standing shall fall



but the moving ever shall stay.

2. From the autobiography of Firuz Shah Tughluq (1309-1388 CE),  
trans. Anjana Narayanan, 2015

Among the gifts which God bestowed upon me, His humble servant, was a desire to erect public buildings. So I built many mosques and colleges and monasteries, that the learned and the elders, the devout and the holy, might worship God in these edifices, and aid the kind builder with their prayers.

Through God's mercy the lands and property of his servants have been safe and secure, protected and guarded during my reign; and I have not allowed the smallest particle of any man's property to be wrested from him.

3. A poem by Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE)

I wonder what was the place where I was last night,  
All around me were half-slaughtered victims of love,  
tossing about in agony.

There was a nymph-like beloved with cypress-like form  
and tulip-like face,

Ruthlessly playing havoc with the hearts of the lovers.

God himself was the master of ceremonies in that heavenly court,  
oh Khusrau, where (the face of) the Prophet too was shedding light  
like a candle.