

7th - Tracing Changes Through Thousand Years II



New social and political groups: The study of the thousand years between 700 and 1750 is a huge challenge to historians largely because of the scale and variety of developments that occurred over the period. At different moments in this period new technologies made their appearance- like the Persian wheel in irrigation, the spinning wheel in weaving, and firearms in combat. New foods and beverages arrived in the subcontinent- potatoes, corn, chilies, tea and coffee.

This was also a period of great mobility. Groups of people travelled long distances in search of opportunity. The subcontinent held immense wealth and the possibilities for people to carve a fortune. One group of people who became important in this period was the rajputs, a name important in this period were the Rajputs, a name derived from “Rajaputra”, the son of a ruler.

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

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

Region and Empire: Large states like those of the Cholas Tughluqs or Mughals encompassed many regions. A Sanskrit Prashasti praising the Delhi Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (1266-1287) explained that he was the rulers of a vast empire that stretched from Bengal (Gauda) in the east to Ghazni (Gajjana) in Afghanistan in the west and included all of south India (Dravida). People of Different regions- Gauda, Andhra, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat- apparently fled before his armies. Historians regard these as exaggerated claims of conquests.

When the Mughal Empire declined in the eighteenth century, it led to the re-emergence of regional states. But years of imperial, pan- regional rule had altered the character of the regions. Across most of the subcontinent the regions were left with the legacies of the big and small states that had ruled over them. This was apparent in the emergence of many distinct and shared traditions: in the realms of governance, the management of the economy, elite cultures, and language.

Old and new religions: The thousand years of history that we are exploring witnessed major developments in religious traditions. People’s belie in the divine was sometimes deeply personal, but more usually it was collective. Collective

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belief in a supernatural agency- religion- was often closely connected with the social and economic organization of local communities.

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

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

One of the major developments of this period was the emergence of the idea of bhakti- of a loving .Personal deity that devotees could reach without the aid of priests or elaborate rituals.

Thinking about time and historical periods: Historians do not see time just as a passing of hours, days or years- as a clock or a calendar. Time also reflects changes in social and economic organization, in the persistence and transformation of ideas and beliefs. The study of time is made somewhat easier by dividing the past into large segments- periods- that possess shared characteristics. In the middle of the nineteenth century British historians divided the history of India into three periods: “Hindus”, “Muslim” and “British”. This division was based on the idea that the religion of rulers was the only important historical change, and that there were no other significant developments- in the economy, society or culture. Such a division also ignored the rich diversity of the subcontinent.

During thousand years the societies of the subcontinent were transformed often and economies in several regions reached a level of prosperity that attracted the interest of European trading companies.

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