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Historical Maps of the Indian Subcontinent

This section explores two significant historical maps of the Indian subcontinent, created centuries apart, illustrating the evolution of geographical knowledge and cartographic techniques.

Al-Idrisi's Twelfth Century Map

Al-Idrisi, a renowned medieval Muslim geographer and cartographer, created a detailed map in the 1100s that depicts the Indian subcontinent. This map is oriented with south at the top, a common practice in medieval Islamic cartography. It symbolically represents coastlines with wavy lines, rivers as flowing lines inland, and mountains with various shapes. Cities and settlements are marked with Arabic labels, indicating important trade hubs and cultural centers of the time.

Exam Question: What are the key features of al-Idrisi's map of the Indian subcontinent, and how does its orientation differ from modern maps?

Answer: Al-Idrisi's map shows the Indian subcontinent with south at the top, coastlines marked by wavy lines, symbolic representations of rivers and mountains, and cities labeled in Arabic. Unlike modern maps, which usually have north at the top, this map is oriented with south at the top.

Guillaume de l'Isle's Early Eighteenth Century Map

Created in the 1720s by French cartographer Guillaume de l'Isle, this black-and-white map covers the Indian subcontinent and surrounding regions. It shows political divisions such as kingdoms and territories, including the Mughal Empire, and marks major rivers and mountain ranges. The map reflects the geopolitical landscape during the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of European colonial influence.

Exam Question: How does Guillaume de l'Isle's map reflect the political and geographical understanding of the Indian subcontinent in the early eighteenth century?

Answer: The map shows various kingdoms and territories with clear boundaries, major rivers, and mountain ranges. It reflects the political divisions during the decline of the Mughal Empire and the increasing European influence, providing a more detailed and familiar representation compared to earlier maps.

Comparison of the Two Maps

The two maps differ significantly in orientation, detail, and political information. Al-Idrisi's map is symbolic and oriented with south at the top, while de l'Isle's map is more geographically accurate with north at the top and detailed political boundaries. These differences highlight changes in cartographic science and geopolitical knowledge over nearly six centuries.

Exam Question: What are the main differences between al-Idrisi's and Guillaume de l'Isle's maps of the Indian subcontinent?

Answer: Al-Idrisi's map is oriented with south at the top, uses symbolic illustrations, and has Arabic labels, while Guillaume de l'Isle's map is oriented with north at the top, shows detailed political boundaries, and uses European place names. The latter reflects more accurate geographical knowledge and political divisions of the early eighteenth century.

Language and Terminology in Historical Context

Understanding historical terms and languages is crucial for interpreting past events accurately. Terms like "Hindustan" and "foreigner" had different meanings in different periods and contexts.

The Term "Hindustan"

In the thirteenth century, "Hindustan" referred politically to the lands under the Delhi Sultanate, mainly northern regions like Punjab and Haryana, excluding south India. By the sixteenth century, it described the geography, culture, and fauna of the broader subcontinent. The term did not carry the modern national meaning it has today.

Exam Question: How did the meaning of the term "Hindustan" change from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century?

Answer: In the thirteenth century, "Hindustan" referred to the political territory of the Delhi Sultanate in northern India, while in the sixteenth century, it described the broader geography and culture of the Indian subcontinent without the political connotations it has today.

Changing Meanings of "Foreigner"

In medieval times, a "foreigner" was anyone outside a particular local society or culture, not necessarily someone from another country. For example, a city-dweller might consider a forest-dweller a foreigner, but two peasants from the same village were not foreigners to each other despite differences in religion or caste.

Exam Question: What did the term "foreigner" mean in medieval India, and how does it differ from its modern meaning?

Answer: In medieval India, "foreigner" referred to someone outside a local society or culture, such as a stranger in a village, rather than someone from another country. Today, it generally means a person from a different nation.

Historians and Their Sources

Historians use various sources to study the past, including coins, inscriptions, architecture, and textual records. From 700 to 1750 CE, the availability and variety of textual records increased significantly, aided by the wider use of paper.

Manuscripts and Archives

Manuscripts were hand-copied documents stored in libraries and archives. Copying by scribes often introduced variations, making it necessary for historians to compare multiple versions to understand original texts.

Exam Question: Why do historians compare different manuscript versions of the same text?

Answer: Because scribes introduced small changes while copying manuscripts by hand, different versions may vary. Comparing them helps historians reconstruct the original text.

Role of Scribes and Miniature Paintings

Scribes manually copied texts before printing technology. Miniature paintings often illustrated manuscripts, adding artistic value. These paintings were small and detailed, sometimes sold separately from the manuscripts.

Exam Question: What was the role of scribes and miniature paintings in preserving knowledge?

Answer: Scribes preserved knowledge by hand-copying texts, while miniature paintings decorated manuscripts, enhancing their beauty and context.

Handwriting Styles in Persian and Arabic Scripts

Different handwriting styles like nastaliq (cursive and easier to read) and shikaste (denser and more complex) affected the readability of manuscripts. Understanding these styles helps historians interpret old texts.

Exam Question: How do the nastaliq and shikaste handwriting styles differ?

Answer: Nastaliq is cursive and easier to read with flowing lines, while shikaste is denser, more complex, and harder to read due to connected and squashed letters.

Social and Political Changes Between 700 and 1750

This period saw significant economic, social, and political transformations, including new technologies, crops, and the rise of various social groups.

New Technologies and Crops

Innovations like the Persian wheel for irrigation, the spinning wheel for weaving, and firearms in combat appeared. New crops such as potatoes, corn, chillies, tea, and coffee

were introduced, brought by migrants and traders.

Exam Question: Name two technological and two agricultural changes that occurred between 700 and 1750.

Answer: Technological changes include the Persian wheel and firearms; agricultural changes include the introduction of potatoes and chillies.

Emergence of New Social Groups

Groups like the Rajputs, Marathas, Sikhs, Jatts, Ahoms, and Kayasthas gained political importance. Rajputs, originally meaning "son of a ruler," became known as warriors with a chivalric code emphasizing valour and loyalty.

Exam Question: Who were the Rajputs, and what qualities were attributed to them?

Answer: Rajputs were warriors claiming Kshatriya status, known for extreme valour and loyalty as described by their poets and bards.

Changes in Peasant Societies and Jatis

Forest clearing and agricultural expansion led many forest-dwellers to migrate or become peasants. Peasant groups became more differentiated economically and socially, forming sub-castes or jatis with their own rules enforced by assemblies called jati panchayats.

Exam Question: What role did jati panchayats play in peasant societies?

Answer: Jati panchayats were assemblies of elders that enforced rules and regulations within jatis to manage member conduct.

The Persian Wheel

The Persian wheel, or saqiya, is a water-lifting device used for irrigation. It consists of a large wheel turned manually or by animals, with attached buckets that lift water from wells or rivers to fields. It operates on the principle of mechanical advantage, enabling efficient water lifting without electricity.

Exam Question: How does the Persian wheel help in irrigation?

Answer: The Persian wheel lifts water using buckets attached to a rotating wheel powered by animals or humans, allowing water to be transported from sources to fields for irrigation.

Region and Empire in Medieval India

Large empires like the Cholas, Tughluqs, and Mughals encompassed many regions with diverse languages and cultures. Rulers often claimed vast territories, sometimes exaggerated, to assert their power.

Provinces of the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate under Muhammad Tughluq was divided into provinces or iqtas for administration. A historical map shows 24 provinces, with important rivers and surrounding seas marked. This division helped manage the vast empire effectively.

Exam Question: What was the purpose of dividing the Delhi Sultanate into provinces?

Answer: Dividing the Sultanate into provinces allowed for easier administration and governance by appointing governors to manage different regions.

Languages and Regional Diversity

Amir Khusrau noted many regional languages such as Sindhi, Kashmiri, Telugu, and Awadhi, contrasting with Sanskrit, which was known only to Brahmanas. Language names and usage have changed over time, reflecting cultural shifts.

Exam Question: According to Amir Khusrau, how did Sanskrit differ from other regional languages?

Answer: Sanskrit was an ancient language not tied to any region and was known only to Brahmanas, unlike regional languages spoken by common people.

Pan-Regional Empires and Regional Identities

Empires spanned diverse regions but did not erase regional distinctiveness. After the Mughal decline, regional states re-emerged, carrying legacies of imperial rule in governance, culture, and language.

Exam Question: How did pan-regional empires affect regional identities in India?

Answer: While empires integrated regions politically, distinct regional traditions in governance, culture, and language persisted and influenced later regional states.

Old and New Religions in the Subcontinent

The period witnessed significant religious developments, including changes within Hinduism and the introduction of Islam.

Changes in Hinduism

New deities were worshipped, temples were built by royalty, and Brahmanas gained social dominance due to their knowledge of Sanskrit texts and royal patronage. The bhakti movement emerged, emphasizing personal devotion without priestly mediation.

Exam Question: What was the bhakti movement, and why was it significant?

Answer: The bhakti movement promoted loving, personal devotion to a deity accessible without priests or rituals, making religion more personal and inclusive.

Introduction and Spread of Islam

Islam arrived in the subcontinent in the seventh century through merchants and migrants. It emphasized the sovereignty of Allah and equality among believers. Different sects like Shia and Sunni Muslims had varying beliefs and practices. Many rulers supported Islamic scholars and jurists.

Exam Question: How did Islam reach India, and what were some of its major sects?

Answer: Islam came to India via merchants and migrants. Major sects included Shia Muslims, who recognized Ali as leader, and Sunni Muslims, who accepted early caliphs' authority.

Understanding Historical Time and Periodisation

Historians divide the past into periods based on social, economic, and cultural changes rather than just rulers' religions. The medieval period (700–1750) saw significant transformations and should not be viewed as static or lacking progress.

Critique of Traditional Periodisation

British historians once divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods based solely on rulers' religions, ignoring other developments. Modern historians prefer economic and social factors to characterize historical periods.

Exam Question: Why is the traditional division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods considered inadequate?

Answer: Because it overlooks important social, economic, and cultural changes and reduces history to rulers' religions, ignoring the subcontinent's diversity.

Continuity and Change in the Medieval Period

The medieval period was marked by the spread of peasant societies, rise of regional and imperial states, development of major religions, and arrival of European trading companies. These changes show dynamic historical processes rather than stagnation.

Exam Question: What are some key features of the medieval period in Indian history?

Answer: Features include growth of peasant societies, formation of regional and imperial states, development of Hinduism and Islam, and European trade influence.

Solved Examples

Example 1

Question: Describe the significance of the Persian wheel in medieval Indian agriculture.

Answer: The Persian wheel was a water-lifting device that enabled irrigation by lifting water from wells or rivers using animal or human power. It improved agricultural productivity in areas without modern pumps.

Example 2

Question: Explain how the term "Hindustan" was used differently in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Answer: In the thirteenth century, "Hindustan" referred politically to the Delhi Sultanate's northern territories, while in the sixteenth century, it described the broader geography and culture of the Indian subcontinent.

Practice Set

Easy

- Who was al-Idrisi, and what is he known for?
- What is a manuscript?

Moderate

- Compare the nastaliq and shikaste handwriting styles.
- What role did Brahmanas play in medieval Hindu society?

Challenging

- Discuss the impact of pan-regional empires on regional languages and cultures in medieval India.
- Explain the importance of understanding historical terminology when studying the past.

Answer Key

- Al-Idrisi was a medieval Muslim geographer known for creating detailed maps, including one of the Indian subcontinent.
- A manuscript is a hand-copied document or book, often stored in archives or libraries.
- Nastaliq is a cursive, flowing handwriting style easier to read; shikaste is denser and more complex, making it harder to read.
- Brahmanas were priests knowledgeable in Sanskrit texts, holding social dominance and supported by rulers.
- Pan-regional empires integrated diverse regions politically but allowed regional languages and cultures to persist and evolve.
- Historical terminology changes over time; understanding original meanings is essential to accurately interpret past events.

Quick Reference

- **Al-Idrisi:** 12th-century Muslim geographer and cartographer.
- **Guillaume de l'Isle:** 18th-century French cartographer.
- **Persian wheel:** Ancient water-lifting device for irrigation.
- **Jati:** Sub-caste group with social rules enforced by jati panchayats.
- **Bhakti:** Devotional movement emphasizing personal connection to deity.
- **Delhi Sultanate:** Medieval Muslim kingdom in northern India.

Glossary

Archive

A place where documents and manuscripts are stored for preservation and study.

Brahmanas

Priests in Hindu society knowledgeable in Sanskrit texts, holding social and religious authority.

Cartographer

A person who makes maps.

Jati Panchayat

An assembly of elders that enforces rules within a jati (sub-caste).

Manuscript

A hand-written document or book copied by scribes before printing technology.

Patron

An influential person who supports artists, scholars, or religious figures.

Persian Wheel (Saqiya)

A mechanical device used to lift water for irrigation using animal or human power.

Rajput

A member of a warrior group claiming Kshatriya status, known for valour and loyalty.

Bhakti

A devotional movement focusing on personal love and devotion to a deity.

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