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## Language and Regional Identity

One of the commonest ways of describing people is in terms of the language they speak. When we refer to a person as a Tamil or an Oriya, this usually means that he or she speaks Tamil or Oriya and lives in Tamil Nadu or Orissa. We also tend to associate each region with distinctive kinds of food, clothes, poetry, dance, music and painting. Sometimes we take these identities for granted and assume that they have existed from time immemorial. However, the frontiers separating regions have evolved over time (and in fact are still changing). Also, what we understand as regional cultures today are often the product of complex processes of intermixing of local traditions with ideas from other parts of the subcontinent. Some traditions appear specific to some regions, others seem to be similar across regions, and yet others derive from older practices in a particular area, but take a new form in other regions.

**Question:** Find out how many states have been created in the last 10 years. Is each of these states a region?

## The Cheras and the Development of Malayalam

The Chera kingdom of Mahodayapuram was established in the ninth century in the south-western part of the peninsula, part of the present-day Kerala. It is likely that Malayalam was spoken in this area. The rulers introduced the Malayalam language and script in their inscriptions. This is one of the earliest examples of the use of a regional language in official records in the subcontinent.

At the same time, the Cheras also drew upon Sanskritic traditions. The temple theatre of Kerala, traced to this period, borrowed stories from the Sanskrit epics. 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.

**Question:** Find out when the language(s) you speak at home were first used for writing.

## Rulers and Religious Traditions

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### The Jagannatha Cult

Regional cultures often grew around religious traditions. The cult of Jagannatha (literally, lord of the world, a name for Vishnu) at Puri, Orissa, is a prime example. The local tribal people make the wooden image of the deity, suggesting that the deity was originally a local god, later identified with Vishnu.

In the twelfth century, Anantavarman of the Ganga dynasty erected a temple for Purushottama Jagannatha at Puri. In 1230, king Anangabhim III dedicated his kingdom to the deity and proclaimed himself the “deputy” of the god.

As the temple gained importance as a pilgrimage centre, its authority in social and political matters increased. Conquerors such as the Mughals, Marathas, and the English East India Company sought control over the temple to legitimize their rule.

# The Rajputs and Traditions of Heroism

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In the nineteenth century, the region now known as Rajasthan was called Rajputana. While many groups identify as Rajputs, the region was inhabited by diverse peoples. Rajputs contributed significantly to Rajasthan's distinctive culture.

From about the eighth century, various Rajput families ruled most of present-day Rajasthan. They cherished the ideal of the hero who fought valiantly, often choosing death on the battlefield rather than defeat. Stories of Rajput heroes were recorded in poems and songs, recited by trained minstrels, preserving memories and inspiring others.

Women sometimes appear in these stories, often following their heroic husbands in life and death, including the practice of widow immolation (sati). Those who followed the heroic ideal often paid with their lives.

**Question:** Did women find a place within these stories? What roles did they play?

## Beyond Regional Frontiers: The Story of Kathak

Kathak, a classical dance form associated with north India, originated from temple storytellers called kathaks. It evolved during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the bhakti movement, enacting legends of Radha-Krishna in folk plays called rasa lila.

Under Mughal patronage, Kathak developed distinctive features and two main traditions or gharanas emerged: Jaipur and Lucknow. By the nineteenth century, Kathak was established in regions including Punjab, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh. It emphasizes intricate footwork, elaborate costumes, and storytelling.

Kathak, like other cultural practices, was disfavored by British administrators but survived and was recognized as one of India's six classical dance forms after independence.

**Question:** Find out whether there are traditions of heroes or heroines in your town or village. What qualities are associated with them? How do these compare with Rajput heroic ideals?

## Classical Dances of India

Classical dances are often defined by religious themes, skill acquired through training, and adherence to established rules. However, many folk dances share these characteristics. The term “classical” does not necessarily imply superiority.

Recognized classical dance forms include Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu), Kathakali (Kerala), Odissi (Odisha), Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh), Manipuri (Manipur), and Kathak (North India).

**Question:** Find out more about any one of these dance forms.

## Painting for Patrons: The Tradition of Miniatures

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Miniature paintings are small-sized artworks, generally done in watercolour on cloth or paper. Early miniatures were on palm leaves or wood. Some of the most beautiful were used to illustrate Jaina texts in western India.

Mughal emperors Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan patronized skilled painters who illustrated manuscripts of historical accounts and poetry, portraying court scenes, battles, and social life. These paintings were often gifts viewed only by the emperor and close associates.

With the decline of the Mughal Empire, painters moved to regional courts in the Deccan and Rajasthan, blending Mughal styles with local traditions. Themes included portraits, mythology, and poetry.

The Himalayan foothills developed the Basohli style of miniature painting by the late seventeenth century, known for bold and intense colours.

The Kangra school of painting emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, inspired by Vaishnavite traditions, characterized by soft colours and lyrical themes.

**Question:** How did Mughal miniature painting influence regional art styles?

## A Closer Look: Bengal

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### The Growth of a Regional Language

People often identify regions by the language spoken, but Bengali evolved over time. Early Sanskrit texts suggest Bengal's people did not originally speak Sanskritic languages. From the fourth-third centuries BCE, commercial ties with Magadha increased Sanskrit influence. Gupta rulers settled Brahmanas in north Bengal, strengthening cultural ties.

By the seventh century, languages related to Sanskrit were in use across Bengal. Bengal became a regional kingdom under the Palas from the eighth century. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, independent Sultans ruled Bengal. Akbar conquered Bengal in 1586, making it a suba with Persian as the administrative language, while Bengali developed as a regional language.

By the fifteenth century, Bengali dialects united into a common literary language based on western Bengal's spoken language. Bengali includes words from tribal languages, Persian, and European languages.

Early Bengali literature falls into two categories: one influenced by Sanskrit, including translations of epics and bhakti literature; the other independent, including Nath literature, folk tales, and ballads.

**Question:** Why do you think the second category of texts was not written down?

## Pirs and Temples

From the sixteenth century, migration from western to south-eastern Bengal led to forest clearing and rice cultivation. Local fisherfolk and shifting cultivators merged with new peasant communities.

Mughal officials received land and established mosques as centres for religious transformation. Community leaders called pirs, including saints, Sufis, deified soldiers, and animistic spirits, provided order and assurance. Their shrines are widespread in Bengal.

Temple building increased from the late fifteenth century to the nineteenth century, often by rising social groups like oil pressers and bell metal workers, who used temples to proclaim status. Temples evolved from thatched huts to double-roofed (dochala) and four-roofed (chauchala) structures, characteristic of Bengali temple architecture.

Temples were built on square platforms with relatively plain interiors and decorated outer walls featuring paintings, ornamental tiles, or terracotta tablets, especially in Vishnupur.

**Question:** Why were many temples built by “low” social groups in Bengal?

## Solved Examples

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**Example 1:** Explain the significance of the Jagannatha cult in Orissa.

**Answer:** The Jagannatha cult originated as a local tribal deity worshipped in Puri, later identified with Vishnu. The temple became a major pilgrimage centre, increasing its social and political authority. Rulers who controlled Orissa sought to control the temple to legitimize their rule, showing the cult's importance in regional culture and politics.

## Example 2: Describe the evolution of the Bengali language.

**Answer:** Bengali evolved from non-Sanskritic languages influenced by Sanskrit through political and cultural contact with Magadha and the Gupta Empire. It developed as a regional language during the Sultanate and Mughal periods, incorporating words from various sources and uniting dialects into a literary language by the fifteenth century.

## Practice Set

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### Easy

- What is the significance of regional languages in identifying cultures?
- Name two classical dance forms of India.

### Moderate

- Explain how the Rajput heroic ideal influenced regional culture in Rajasthan.
- Describe the characteristics of Mughal miniature paintings.

### Challenging

- Discuss the role of pirs in the religious and social life of Bengal during the Mughal period.
- Analyze the factors that contributed to the development of Bengali as a regional language.

## Answer Key

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- Regional languages help identify people and their cultural practices, linking language with food, clothing, art, and traditions.

- Examples of classical dance forms: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri.
- Rajput heroic ideals emphasized valour, loyalty, and sacrifice, influencing poetry, songs, and cultural identity in Rajasthan.
- Mughal miniature paintings are detailed, vibrant, and depict court scenes, battles, and social life with fine brushwork.
- Pirs acted as spiritual guides and community leaders, providing order and religious guidance in Bengal's new settlements.
- Bengali developed through cultural contact, political changes, and incorporation of diverse linguistic influences over centuries.

## Quick Reference

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- **Cheras:** Early rulers in Kerala who promoted Malayalam language and culture.
- **Jagannatha Cult:** Religious tradition centered in Puri, Orissa, linked to Vishnu worship.
- **Rajputs:** Warrior rulers of Rajasthan known for heroic ideals.
- **Kathak:** Classical dance form originating from temple storytellers in North India.
- **Miniature Paintings:** Small, detailed paintings patronized by Mughal and regional courts.
- **Bengali Language:** Regional language evolved from Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic influences.
- **Pirs:** Spiritual leaders and community guides in Bengal.
- **Temple Architecture:** Dochala and chauchala styles characteristic of Bengal.

## Glossary

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### Manipravalam

A literary style combining Sanskrit and regional language, meaning “diamonds and corals.”

### Pir

A spiritual guide or saint, often associated with Sufism.

### Bhakti Movement

A devotional movement emphasizing love and devotion to God.

### Gharana

A school or style of classical Indian dance or music.

### Miniature Painting

Small, detailed paintings often illustrating manuscripts.

Dochala

Double-roofed traditional Bengali hut or temple style.

Chauchala

Four-roofed traditional Bengali hut or temple style.

Terracotta

Baked clay used for making plaques and decorative art.

## Chronology of Key Events

Time Period / Year	Event / Change	Importance
9th century CE	Establishment of Chera kingdom in Kerala	Introduction of Malayalam language and script in official records
12th century CE	Construction of Jagannatha temple at Puri	Growth of Jagannatha cult and regional religious identity
8th century CE onwards	Rajput rule in Rajasthan	Development of heroic traditions and cultural identity
15th-16th centuries CE	Evolution of Kathak dance form	Integration of bhakti movement and court patronage
16th-18th centuries CE	Development of Bengali language and literature	Formation of regional language influenced by Sanskrit and other sources
Late 15th - 19th centuries CE	Temple building and cultural consolidation in Bengal	Expression of social status and religious devotion through architecture