CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

1 Introduction: situating India

Today in Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi – in any big city in India – people, old, young and in-between, are everywhere chatting on cell phones or mobiles. The ring tones that chime constantly from every conceivable nook and cranny are ubiquitous, adding to the general cacophony of a modern South Asian street scene. The sound of portable phones is the most recent addition to the hodgepodge of noises one might hear, intermingling with loudspeakers playing music from the latest Bollywood hits, car and bus horns blaring, vendors of food and other items shouting out their wares, temple bells being struck, and the calling of Muslims to prayer. The new telecommunication technologies allow a person in Bangalore or Hyderabad to answer the questions of a customer of a multinational corporation calling from North America, while TV networks based in the West such as MTV, BBC, and CNN are now broadcast throughout the Indian subcontinent. Meanwhile, the Western pop culture transmitted to other parts of the globe is more and more permeated with influences from South Asia: Nora Jones, the daughter of world famous sitarist Ravi Shankar, is among the best selling artists of the early 2000s; the voice of the late Nusrat Ali Khan serves as a backdrop to the hit film *Dead Man Walking*; and the grocer Apu figures on the long-running animated TV show, *The Simpsons*. Cultural influences across national and regional boundaries are much more conspicuous today than ever before, but people have exchanged ideas, technologies, and goods with different societies since the beginning of human history.

The food served at any good Indian restaurant offers a useful illustration of just how much the culture of each region of the world is indebted to others. Kabobs, keema, and korma are all derived from the cuisines of the Middle East and Central Asia; these areas also contributed the rich, creamy sauces that are so prominent in Indian restaurant fare abroad. Many items long considered staples of the Indian diet such as chili peppers, potatoes, and tomatoes were introduced from the New World beginning in the sixteenth century, as were fruits like pineapple and papaya. Other popular Indian foods like cauliflower and cabbage, of European

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

origin, were not grown in the subcontinent until after 1850. South Asia, in its turn, contributed the cucumber, black pepper, cinnamon, and possibly also the sweet orange and eggplant to the world; it also transmitted rice, sugarcane, citrus fruits, tea, and cotton to the lands lying to its west.

Although cross-cultural interaction has always been a factor in the history of South Asia, as in the history of every region of Eurasia, it was particularly significant during the period covered in this book, the years from 1200 to 1750. Beginning in 1200, much of north India came under the control of warriors whose family origins lay in Afghanistan or Central Asia. They were not large in number, but their political importance encouraged an influx of educated immigrants from the Islamic world and closer ties between South Asia and the regions to its west. The Central Asian ethnic heritage, Persian cultural orientation, and Islamic religious affiliation of this ruling class introduced many novel elements into the subcontinent, including different forms of art and architecture, political ideologies and practices, and techniques of warfare. Muslim scholars, mystics, and institutions also received much patronage from this new political elite, leading eventually to the presence of a sizeable Muslim population in the subcontinent. The already pluralistic human landscape of South Asia was enriched as a consequence and, over time, a composite culture developed that drew on both the Indic and Perso-Islamic traditions. This is especially visible in the material culture of South Asia today, where forms of dress like the *salwar-kamiz* (tunics worn over long, loose pants) worn by many urban women, textile designs like paisley, or the enameled and filigreed patterns on metal objects owe their inspiration largely to contact with the Islamic world.

In the centuries after 1200, the society and culture of South Asia became more diverse not only because of influences from Central Asia and the Middle East but also because the multiple regions within the subcontinent increasingly followed different paths. The modern regional societies of the subcontinent – as distinct from each other as those of France, England, and Italy in Europe – vary in their traditional dress, diet, ritual observances, social groupings, and most notably in their languages. Although their evolution was a long and complex historical process, several of the regional societies of the modern day had begun to take shape by 1200. This is most true of south India, where the four major language cultures had found political expression in separate states. Regions farther to the north were less distinctly articulated in political terms, but also gradually developed separate literary cultures in a process similar to the vernacularization of European literature, which took place roughly in the same time period. Regional differences were also increasingly apparent in numerous ways ranging from architectural styles (which we will discuss

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

later in this chapter), the prevalence of certain religions or religious sects, and involvement in overseas trade. At the same time, however, the diverse regional societies of South Asia came into ever closer contact with each other from 1200 onward as their political histories intersected and internal trade expanded.

A multiregional perspective on historical developments and an interest in the interaction between Indic and Islamic cultures and peoples are the hallmarks of this book, two ways in which it departs most significantly from its predecessors. By this means, we aim to provide a better understanding of the antecedents of modern South Asia, an intricate montage assembled from assorted materials that were incorporated at different points of time. Although we cannot do justice to all the multiple cultures and societies of South Asia in a book of this size, some consideration of the differing historical trajectories of its various regions is essential in order to appreciate its rich and complex heritage. Rather than focusing almost exclusively on the Gangetic north as many earlier scholars have, therefore, we adopt a wider view that also covers events and processes taking place in south India and elsewhere. Secondly, we acknowledge that the encounter between Indic and Islamic peoples and cultures led to short-term conflicts, as historians in the past have often described. Frequently overlooked in standard accounts, however, is the extent to which cultural productions and practices inspired by Perso-Islamic traditions became integral to the subcontinent as a whole over the long run. South Asia's art and architecture, its political rituals, its administrative and military technologies, and even aspects of its popular religions were deeply inflected by the new forms introduced, beginning in 1200, as we have attempted to demonstrate.

Another distinguishing feature of this book is its coverage of political culture, particularly as manifested in elite cultural productions such as paintings and monuments. This is not to say that we omit other dimensions of South Asia's history from 1200 to 1750; an overview of the most important developments in the society, economy, and religious sphere is provided, as well as an account of the significant political events. The overall survey is supplemented, however, by a more extensive treatment of art, architecture, and royal courts than is typical of general books on the period. Partly because of our own interests and expertise, we have chosen to emphasize culture more than political economy, maritime trade, the agrarian system, or administrative structures. We also wished to provide an alternative to the numerous works on the latter topics that already exist. Having stated that our emphasis is on culture, it is necessary to make clear that we are referring to the culture of South Asia's political elites. Only the most powerful members of the population had the means

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

to commission texts, monuments, and other objects that have lasted to the current day. Over the centuries, as India became more prosperous, certain features of elite culture were transmitted downward to more modest social levels such as that of the rural gentry or urban banking community. But not until we arrive at almost the end of our period can we say much about the lives of those below the upper class.

The time span surveyed in this book, the years from 1200 to 1750, was previously known as either the medieval or Muslim period of India's history, with everything preceding it lumped together in a single ancient era. Over the past several decades, the way historians have divided up India's past has changed and been brought more in line with the periodization of European history. Medieval now refers to the centuries from either 500 or 700 CE up to approximately 1500, while the 300 years from 1500 and 1800 are called early modern, just as in the case of Europe. Although the new scheme of periodization is easier to grasp due to its similarity to the way Europe's history is conceptualized, this is not the primary reason it was adopted. There are good justifications internal to Indian history why the 1,000 years between 500 and 1500 should be considered as a single unit of the past. Shortly after 500, the last of the ancient Indian empires disappeared and for the next millennium India's states were typically smaller and more decentralized. Between approximately 1500 and 1800, as we argue in chapter 6, larger and more efficient states once again emerge in India, along with a host of other phenomena, such as commercialization, that are characteristic of the early modern period throughout much of the world. Since the central concerns of many historians are political structures and the economic systems that underpin them, the new periodization of Indian history with a dividing point at 1500 is more appropriate.

From the perspective of political culture, on the other hand, the 1200–1750 period is a more coherent and thus better unit of time to study. The twin processes of growing Perso-Islamic influence and increasing regionalization have started gaining momentum by 1200 and continue to flourish with vigor up to our ending point in 1750. Soon thereafter, the course of Indian history becomes more and more entangled with that of Britain, and its political culture undergoes substantial transformation, ushering in a different age. In terms of our specific concerns, therefore, it makes sense to set the parameters of the era surveyed at 1200 to 1750. However, we do not endorse the label "Muslim" that was applied to this period in histories of South Asia written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in contrast to the preceding "Hindu" and subsequent "British" periods. The use of a religious affiliation to characterize the first two sets of rulers, Hindu and Muslim, is highly objectionable,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

especially when the colonial rulers are described rather by their British nationality. This is a striking illustration of the Orientalist belief that religion was the most important force in traditional Indian society and thus, by extension, that the actions of its political elites were primarily motivated by their religious faith. Worst of all, the Hindu–Muslim binary sets up these two alleged social groups in opposition to each other as natural competitors or even foes, ignoring the many ways in which Indic and Indo-Muslim elites interacted and created a joint political and artistic culture.

Instead, we view the era from 1200 to 1750 as the foundation for the highly pluralistic human landscape of modern South Asia, with its composite culture that draws on both Indic and Islamic high traditions in many regional variants. In order to better understand South Asia's pluralism, we turn next to a consideration of India's physical and cultural geography, both in relation to the world setting and internally.

India as a world region

The word "subcontinent" used to describe the South Asian landmass highlights the fact that it is a natural physical region separate from the rest of Eurasia. To the north, the series of mountain ranges collectively known as the Himalayas form a belt about 2,500 kilometers in length and between 200 and 400 kilometers in width, beyond which lies the arid and high Tibetan plateau. The combination of inhospitable plateau and formidable mountain barrier has largely sealed off access to the subcontinent from the north. The Arabian Sea in the west and the Bay of Bengal in the east, bodies of water that comprise part of the larger Indian Ocean, surround much of South Asia and provide it with a coastline of approximately 8,500 kilometers. Hills run between the mountains and the ocean at both ends of the subcontinent, to its west and to its east, serving to further demarcate the subcontinent's boundaries and impede entry into it. South Asia – that is, the modern nations of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh on the subcontinent, along with the large island nation of Sri Lanka – is set apart from the rest of the world by these various natural geographical features, and its identity as a discrete world region appears logical to us.

If we look back in history, however, it is clear that there was constant movement into and out of the subcontinent. The geographic features that clearly define South Asia as a physical region by no means sealed it off from the rest of the world. A lively sea traffic connected the coasts of India with the Persian Gulf and Red Sea during the height of the Roman empire, while maritime contact with mainland Southeast Asia was established by

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

Map 1.1 South Asia today

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

at least the fourth century CE. Overland routes into the subcontinent from the northwest were accessible enough that Alexander the Great could lead a large army into the Punjab during the fourth century BCE. To be sure, there was less overland traffic over the Himalayas, although Buddhism and other aspects of Indian culture did diffuse into the Tibetan plateau during the medieval period. Likewise, the eastern land corridor seems to have been little used: the eastern extremities of the subcontinent were sparsely inhabited (as was the adjoining territory in modern Myanmar) and lay outside the cultural and political perimeters of Indian civilization until 500 or less years ago.

From a historical perspective, the western and eastern boundaries of South Asia as a cultural and political region appear quite different from the current national borders that separate Pakistan from Afghanistan and Iran to the west, on the one hand, and India and Bangladesh from Myanmar to the east, on the other. Not until well into the period we are covering in this book did Bangladesh become incorporated into the South Asian sphere. The situation in the west is even more ambiguous. The area of Afghanistan and even parts of Central Asia were several times in the distant past included in a polity based in South Asia. The cultural impact of Indian civilization was similarly felt far outside South Asia's current limits during much of the first millennium CE: Buddhism flourished throughout Afghanistan and Central Asia, while the North Indian Brahmi script was adapted to several Central Asian languages such as Khotanese and Tocharian. For these reasons alone, one could make a strong case that Afghanistan is (or at least once was) an integral part of South Asia, rather than the Middle East, in cultural and political terms.

We have gone into this point at some length because history books today routinely characterize any people whose origins lie to the west of Pakistan as "foreign" to South Asia and their large-scale movements toward the southeast as "invasions" of the subcontinent. The Khyber Pass in northern Pakistan and the Bolan Pass in southern Pakistan are typically described as the weak points in South Asia's defenses which have repeatedly been penetrated by foreign invaders. This mindset ignores the many interconnections over the millennia across the terrain that is now divided up between the countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Instead, it projects backward into the past a geo-political reality that took shape only at the very end of the nineteenth century, after the British proved incapable of extending their control westward to a line that ran on a north–south diagonal through the Afghan cities of Kabul, Ghazni, and Qandahar (see Maps 2.1 and 5.1). Historically, there was far more contact and communication between the people living around Delhi and Kabul, separated by only 1,000 kilometers, than between the major cities

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

of north and south India, separated by 2,000 kilometers or more; even Mumbai is 1,400 kilometers distant from Delhi.

In other words, the coherence of South Asia as a world region in our current perception is largely a legacy of British colonialism. The British were the first and only political power to ever extend their sway over all of South Asia and the limits of their dominion now define the boundaries of the region. The large size of the subcontinent, the varied nature of its physical environments, and the great diversity of its human population – in language, ethnicity, and mode of subsistence – made it impossible for any precolonial polity to conquer much less govern. The diversity of South Asia's physical and human geography makes it most comparable to (western and central) Europe among world regions, in the view of Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen. In *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, they argue that defining Europe as a continent overstates its size, importance, and uniqueness, and so they prefer to classify it as one of several Eurasian subcontinents. Furthermore, in terms of territorial extent, historic levels of population, multiplicity of regional languages and cultures, and reliance on shared literary languages, they believe Europe is more analogous to South Asia than to any other part of the world.

Regarding South Asia as similar to Europe is instructive in a number of ways. While the term Europe certainly refers to a particular location on the globe, the exact perimeters of Europe are difficult to pin down and have shifted over time. As Robert Bartlett has said in reference to the high middle ages, "Europe is both a region and an idea."[1] That is, Europe is not defined simply by its physical geography but also by cultural and political criteria. We should recognize that the current national boundaries of South Asia are similarly not intrinsic or natural to the region but have been constructed through human action. All world regions have had porous and ill-defined border zones through which an assortment of peoples and their cultures have migrated back and forth. Instead of acknowledging that movement, migration, and change are the most fundamental of historical experiences, scholars of South Asia have tended to depict any influences or peoples from the outside as intrusive violations of the subcontinent's integrity or true essence. At the same time, South Asia has been characterized as a place that was exceptionally susceptible to invasion beginning with the migrations of Indo-Aryan speakers into the subcontinent sometime around the early second millennium BCE. This stands in marked contrast to China, which is typically said

[1] *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 1.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information

to have assimilated its numerous nomadic invaders and thus triumphed over them, or Europe, despite its history of invasion and colonization by Rome, the Huns, Vikings, Magyars, and Arabs.

If we think of South Asia as akin to Europe, our perspective on its political fragmentation also changes. Rather than expecting that the subcontinent's vast territory should have been politically unified as was the case in China, we can view the presence of numerous kingdoms in 1000 CE as a normal course of affairs in such a large and diverse area. The proliferation of polities then becomes a sign of dynamism and not a civilizational defect that facilitated the conquest of South Asia by outsiders. It testifies to the expansion of agrarian settlement throughout the subcontinent, to the growth of locality-based societies, and to the evolution of regional cultures. Like Europe, South Asia had a common elite "civilization" that served to unify it culturally in a general sense prior to 1200, although there were many different local practices and beliefs. From 1200 onward, the pan-Indic civilization was increasingly eclipsed in importance by regional cultures that had evolved their own distinctive variations on the Indic theme. Just as in Europe, regionalization occurred at the expense of a cosmopolitan language and culture, in South Asia's case, Sanskrit, and was a sign of the growing relevance of more localized concerns and identities among the elite populations. These regional cultures also interacted with or were affected by aspects of the cosmopolitan culture of Persia and the Middle East in differing ways in the centuries after 1200. It is thus to a discussion of the unity and diversity of South Asia's internal physical and cultural landscapes that we now turn.

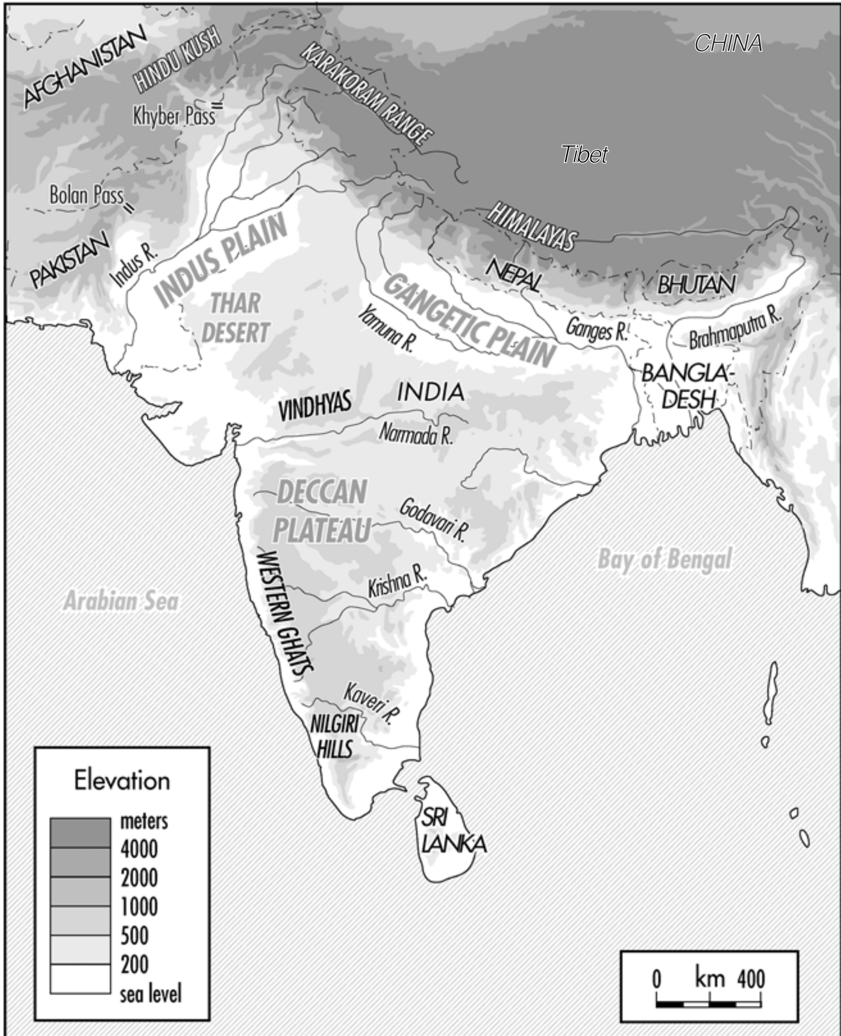
India's physical and human landscapes

The greatest divide in South Asia's physical and human geography is between north and south. The environment of the north has been shaped by the Himalayas, a geologically young set of mountains with extraordinarily high crests such as Mt. Everest (in Nepal), the highest mountain in the world at 8,850 meters (29,028 feet), and Kanchenjunga (in India) at 8,586 meters. The weight of this massive mountain system caused the land lying to its south to sink and form a vast low plain. The melting snows of the Himalayas feed numerous streams that have contributed a fertile overlay of soil to this plain, named the Indo-Gangetic after the two major river systems. The Indus river and its four tributaries lie at the western end of the plain; the Ganges with its many tributaries such as the Yamuna, which joins the Ganges river at the city of Allahabad, form the central portion. At the eastern end, the Ganges is approached by the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521005396 - India Before Europe
Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot
Excerpt
More information



Map 1.2 Physical geography of South Asia

Brahmaputra river originating in Tibet. Large sections of these perennial rivers of north India are navigable and were major routes of transport in the past.

The Vindhya range and the adjacent Narmada river are the traditional boundaries between north India and peninsular or south India. Most of the peninsula is a slightly elevated plateau that inclines gently toward the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org