
While coastal Gujarat, due to its maritime past, continues to be one of the most actively studied regions of South Asia, a scholarly study of the region as a whole has been an exception. Sheikh’s monograph remedies this lacunae to a great extent by using Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian and medieval Gujarati sources.

Sheikh interrogates three assumptions plaguing our understanding of Gujarat in her monograph. First, the assumption that ‘Gujarat’ denotes not just the modern state of Gujarat that came into existence in 1960 in the Union of India, but a far larger linguistic zone. Second, that ‘Gujarat’ possesses a clearly defined and naturally bounded topographical area. And, third, that ‘Gujarat’ displays a cultural continuity from the Solanki or Chalukya period, i.e. from circa 1100. This last assumption—that of a visible cultural unity from the Solanki period—has not been adequately interrogated by historians, and to do this a study of medieval Gujarat’s multi-cultural past is of essence. Nor does, Sheikh contends, the puzzling historiographical silence on this issue explain the longevity of this assumption (2). For Sheikh, the neglect of Gujarat’s multi-cultural and multi-ethnic past, and its ‘peculiar caste and community configurations’, created an ideological vacuum resulting in the Godhra riots of 2002 (2). *Forging a Region* is therefore both timely and a welcome addition to scholarly studies on historical Gujarat in the post-Godhra period.

The Godhra issue apart, *Forging a Region* is also a welcome addition to the growing corpus of literature on regions and histories in medieval South Asia. No longer studied in terms of dynasties and wars, the present notion of region as *space* includes boundaries (both imagined and real), routes and points of transmission (nodes) as well as region as *place*-revealing networks of mobility (languages, peoples, ideas, commodities, warriors and horses, cultures, religious notions), power (political, military, religious, diplomatic, mercantile), prestige (tributes, alliances, marriages, missions, literary cultures), and movement (spatial, ideological, human). Within the category of human movements, Sheikh includes pilgrimage, migration, and settlement of both lay and religious groups. She highlights the activities of Sufis, *pirs*, and *darbeshes*, the existence of many Jain and Buddhist
groups along with the various Hindu sects in Gujarat, and shows that pilgrimage networks actually strengthened when monumental temple building declined in Gujarat (153), an important point. The categories of pilgrim and trader that Sheikh highlights are no less significant than rulers in creating a region. Pirates, herders, chiefs, and traders, not the substantial maritime traders that Tomé Pires (c. 1465-1524/1540) and a succession of Western travelers, diarists, company officials and scholars after him would describe, people this particular landscape (chapter 3).

Starting from the many regions of Gujarat that show that boundaries were porous and never fixed (chapter 1), Sheikh concentrates on settlement and authority in eastern Gujarat (chapter 2) as opposed to pastoralism, trade, and settlement in Saurashtra and Kachchh (chapter 3), demonstrating the conflictual relationship between the west and east (109, 112). These opening chapters are followed by discussions of religion, politics and patronage (chapter 4), and the court and state (chapter 5). Significantly, Sheikh ends her monograph with the evolution of a regional consensus from c. 1390 to 1511, the latter date the end of the reign of Gujarat’s defining ruler Mahmud I Bigara (r. 1458-1511), thus ignoring the momentous date of the Mughal conquest of 1584.

Sheikh’s monograph studies Gujarat from the time of its existence as a Solanki state until the twelfth century, to its takeover by the Delhi Sultanate (Khalji and Tughlak) in the fourteenth century, and its emergence as an independent sultanate in the fifteenth century. The lineages and histories of regionalism are sought in hitherto unutilized sources, such as ballads, plays, biographies and poems in Sanskrit and Apabhramsa and religious texts from Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and Jain sources as well as the more familiar Persian chronicles and literary works, and published inscriptions in Sanskrit, Persian, old Gujarati and Arabic (8-9). Conventional chronology and archive are therefore overturned in Sheikh’s vision, and this approach offers an alternate window through which we study the ‘connected history’ of Gujarat’s medieval past. Sheikh asks: ‘how many in Gujarat, apart from a handful of specialists, remember that Mahmud Bigara and Narasimha Maheta were near contemporaries? In the historiography, the sultanate belongs to a persianate world rendered alien by language and religious denomination, while the father of Gujarati poetry belongs to a timeless narrative of Hindu devotional sensibility. This polarization is deeply unproductive for a historian. The first task has been to get these histories to talk to one another’ (227). Sheikh’s strategy has been effective.