

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional

Early State and Society in Eastern India, Deccan and South India

Paper 1 · Unit 9

Satavahanas, the Sangam age and early state formation outside the Ganga valley: 35 marks in four years, and the answer to any question about north-south connection.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Early state and society in eastern India, Deccan and south India: Kharavela, the Satavahanas, Tamil states of the Sangam age; administration, economy, land grants, coinage, trade guilds and urban centres; Buddhist centres; Sangam literature and culture; art and architecture.

Kharavela and eastern India

A short section, but Kharavela is named in the syllabus and appears in almost no script.

- **Kharavela** ruled Kalinga in the first century BCE and belonged to the Chedi or Mahameghavahana dynasty, restoring Kalinga's power after its devastation by Ashoka.
- **Hathigumpha inscription** at Udayagiri near Bhubaneswar is the sole substantial source, written in Prakrit in Brahmi and composed as a year-by-year record of his reign.
- Achievements it claims include military campaigns westward and southward, the repair of canals and city walls, patronage of Jainism, and the recovery of a Jain image carried off by a Nanda king.
- That reference to a Nanda ruler is chronologically valuable, since it is one of the few indigenous mentions of the dynasty that preceded the Mauryas.
- **Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves** were excavated as Jain monastic dwellings under his patronage, and they are the principal architectural remains of the reign.
- Kalinga's significance is its **maritime orientation**, since its ports connected eastern India to Southeast Asia, and the Bali Yatra festival preserves the memory of that trade.

The Satavahanas

Asked in 2026 as a link between north and south that strengthened trade, urbanisation and cultural integration. The link framing is exactly right.

- Ruling the Deccan from roughly the first century BCE to the third century CE, with capitals at **Pratishthana and Amaravati**, the dynasty is also called the Andhras in the Puranas.
- **Gautamiputra Satakarni**, the greatest ruler, defeated the Western Kshatrapa Nahapana, and the **Nasik prashasti** issued by his mother Gautami Balashri is the principal record of his reign.
- That inscription describes him as destroyer of the Shakas, Yavanas and Pahlavas and as one who stopped the mixing of the four varnas, which shows a Brahmanical self-presentation.
- **Matronymic naming**, with rulers identified through their mothers as Gautamiputra and Vasishthiputra, is the dynasty's distinctive feature and suggests unusual status for women even within a patrilineal system.
- **Land grants** to Buddhist monks and Brahmins begin here in recorded form, and they are the earliest Indian grants transferring revenue rights, which makes the Satavahanas the starting point of the feudalism debate.
- **Trade** flourished with Rome through the western ports, and Satavahana coins in lead, potin and copper are found widely, with some bearing ship motifs indicating maritime commerce.
- **Buddhist patronage** produced the rock-cut chaityas and viharas at **Karle, Bhaja, Nasik and Kanheri**, and the great stupa at **Amaravati** with its narrative limestone reliefs.

- For the 2026 question, the link argument runs: the Satavahanas transmitted northern political forms, Prakrit as an administrative language and Buddhism southward while carrying Deccan and southern trade northward.

The Sangam age

The Tamil south had its own states, literature and Roman trade, and the Sangam corpus is the only substantial secular literature surviving from ancient India.

- **Three crowned kings**, the **Cheras** of the Malabar coast, the **Cholas** of the Kaveri delta and the **Pandiyas** of Madurai, dominated the Tamil country, with the **velir** chieftains below them.
- **Sangam literature** comprises the **Ettuthogai** or eight anthologies and the **Pattuppattu** or ten idylls, together with the **Tolkappiyam** on grammar and poetics, dated broadly between the third century BCE and the third century CE.
- **Tirukkural** by Tiruvalluvar, a work of aphoristic ethics in 1,330 couplets, is the tradition's most influential text and is deliberately non-sectarian.
- **Twin epics**, the **Silappadikaram** of Ilango Adigal and the **Manimekalai** of Sattanar, are slightly later and are the earliest Tamil narrative works, the second explicitly Buddhist.
- **Tinai**, the classification of land into five ecological zones each with its own deity, occupation and poetic mood, is the culture's organising concept and has no parallel elsewhere in Indian literature.
- Poetry divides into **akam**, the interior world of love, and **puram**, the exterior world of war, kingship and public life, and it is the puram poems that supply historical evidence.
- **Roman trade** is confirmed archaeologically at **Arikamedu** and by Roman coin hoards in the Coromandel and Kerala, and the Sangam poems themselves mention the Yavanas and their wine and lamps.
- **Society** was stratified but not by the four-varna scheme, and the Brahmanical order was present without being dominant, which makes the Tamil south a genuinely distinct social formation.

Economy, guilds and urban centres

Named in the syllabus and the material that connects this unit to the Post-Mauryan trade question.

- **Urban centres** in the Deccan and the south included Pratishthana, Tagara, Nasik, Karur, Madurai, Uraiyur, Kaveripattinam and Muziris, and several are named in the Periplus.
- **Kaveripattinam or Puhar**, the Chola port described at length in the Silappadikaram, had separate quarters for foreign merchants, which the text records in unusual detail.
- **Muziris** on the Malabar coast is named in Roman sources and appears on the Peutinger Table, and the Muziris papyrus records the value of a single cargo in Roman currency.
- **Guilds** or **shrenis** appear in inscriptions as donors and as bankers, receiving permanent endowments and paying interest to monasteries, and the Nasik inscriptions record the practice explicitly.
- **Coinage** included Satavahana lead and potin issues, Roman gold and silver in circulation in the south, and punch-marked coins continuing in some regions.
- **Exports** were pepper, pearls, ivory, textiles, precious stones and beryl, and **imports** were wine, glass, coral and above all coin, which is the pattern the Periplus describes.

- **Craft production** is attested by bead-making at Arikamedu, iron and steel manufacture in the south, and the textile production that supplied the Roman trade.

Buddhist centres and religion

Named in the syllabus. The Deccan and Andhra were among the most densely Buddhist regions of ancient India.

- **Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda** in Andhra were major Buddhist centres under Satavahana and later Ikshvaku patronage, and Nagarjunakonda is associated with the philosopher Nagarjuna.
- **Western Deccan caves** at Karle, Bhaja, Bedsa, Nasik, Kanheri and Junnar cluster along trade routes, which shows the connection between commerce and monastic endowment.
- **Merchant donation** is the mechanism, since inscriptions at these sites record gifts from traders, artisans and guilds far more often than from kings.
- **Amaravati school** of sculpture, working in white limestone, is the third great early school alongside Gandhara and Mathura, distinguished by crowded narrative panels and slender elongated figures.
- **Jainism** was strong in the Tamil country and in Kalinga, and the Jain caves at Udayagiri and the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions in Jain cave shelters are the evidence.
- **Tamil religion** in the Sangam period centred on **Murugan, Mayon, Varunan, Ventan and Kottravai**, deities associated with the five tinai landscapes, and Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions coexisted with them.
- **Hero stones or nadukal**, erected for warriors who died in cattle raids, are the period's characteristic monument and the earliest Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions appear on some of them.

What the questions ask

Two questions in four years, on Sangam literature as a window into society and on the Satavahanas as a link. Both are about connection and evidence.

- For **Sangam as a window**, argue that the puram poems give kingship, warfare, trade and social organisation, that akam poetry gives everyday material culture, and that the tinai scheme gives an ecological account of society unavailable anywhere else.
- State the **limitations** too, since the corpus is courtly and bardic, its dating is uncertain within a range of centuries, and it describes an ideal as well as a reality.
- For the **Satavahana link**, give administrative forms, Prakrit, Buddhism and Brahmanical ritual moving south, and Deccan and southern trade goods moving north.
- Bring in **Kharavela** wherever eastern India is mentioned, since he is named in the syllabus and almost never appears in answers.
- Use the **guild endowment inscriptions** as evidence in any question on economy, because they demonstrate institutional continuity and enforceable contract in a way no literary source can.

Last-mile revision

- Kharavela, Chedi dynasty, first century BCE, Hathigumpha inscription, Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves.

- Satavahanas from about first century BCE to third century CE; Gautamiputra Satakarni and the Nasik prashasti of Gautami Balashri; matronymics; earliest land grants.
- Sangam: Cheras, Cholas, Pandyas; Ettuthogai and Pattuppattu; Tolkappiyam; Tirukkural; Silappadikaram and Manimekalai; tinai, akam and puram.
- Trade: Arikamedu, Muziris and the Muziris papyrus, Kaveripattinam, Roman coin hoards, pepper and beryl out, wine and coin in.
- Buddhist: Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, western Deccan caves at Karle and Kanheri, merchant donation, Amaravati limestone school.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating the south as peripheral. It had its own states, its own literature and direct Roman trade in the same centuries.
- Dating Sangam literature precisely. The range is roughly third century BCE to third century CE and precision beyond that is not available.
- Forgetting Kharavela, who is named in the syllabus and known from a single inscription that also mentions the Nandas.
- Missing the matronymic naming of Satavahana rulers, which is their most distinctive social feature.
- Attributing the western Deccan caves to royal patronage. The inscriptions record merchants, artisans and guilds far more often than kings.

Mains Practice

How far does Sangam literature act as a window into the social and cultural traditions of ancient South India?

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

“The Satavahanas not only served as a vital link between Northern and Southern India in the Deccan, but also strengthened trade, urbanization and cultural integration.” Review.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026