

ANANTAM IAS • OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Regional States during Gupta Era

Paper 1 • Unit 11

Pallavas, Chalukyas of Badami and Kadambas: 45 marks in four years, three times what the Guptas themselves scored, and the origin of southern temple architecture.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Regional states during Gupta era: the Kadambas, Pallavas, Chalukyas of Badami; polity and administration, economic conditions, art and architecture, literature, religion and religious institutions; the Kadamba, Pallava, Chalukya art and architecture.

Why the regional states matter more than the Guptas

Across the four papers this unit scored 45 marks and the Guptas scored 15. That inversion is the most useful single fact about Paper 1 preparation in the ancient section.

- Southern and Deccan dynasties are examined more heavily than the northern imperial ones, and the **Pallava-Chalukya conflict** was asked in both 2024 and 2025.
- Reason for the weight is that these dynasties produced **the beginnings of the two great temple traditions**, so architecture questions come here rather than to the Guptas.
- Political geography of the sixth to eighth centuries divides into the **Chalukyas of Badami** in the Deccan, the **Pallavas of Kanchi** in the Tamil country, and the **Kadambas of Banavasi** in coastal Karnataka.
- **Vakatakas** in the northern Deccan are the Guptas' southern contemporaries and allies, and the Ajanta caves were painted substantially under their patronage.
- Southern politics in this period is triangular rather than bipolar, since the **Pandys of Madurai** and later the Cholas are the third element in the Tamil country.
- **Harshavardhana** in the north, ruling 606 to 647 from Kanauj, was checked on the Narmada by the Chalukya Pulakeshin II, and that defeat is the standard illustration that no north Indian power could cross into the Deccan.
- **Economic conditions** are named in the syllabus and rest on inscriptional evidence, showing an expanding agrarian base through land grants, active guilds in the towns, and a continuing Indian Ocean trade connecting the Deccan and Tamil coasts to Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf.
- Sources for the period are unusually good, comprising **copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, the Aihole inscription, Chinese pilgrim accounts and the dynasties' own literary patronage.**

The Chalukyas of Badami

The Deccan power that fought everyone, and whose architecture at Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal is the laboratory of Indian temple form.

- Founded by **Pulakeshin I** around 543 at Vatapi or Badami, the dynasty rose to dominate the western Deccan for two centuries.
- **Pulakeshin II**, ruling from about 610 to 642, is the outstanding figure, and his **Aihole inscription composed by Ravikirti** in Sanskrit records his victories in ornate kavya style.
- The inscription's claim that he defeated **Harshavardhana on the Narmada** is the period's best known military event, and it fixed the Narmada as the effective boundary between north and south.
- Chalukya expansion collided with the **Pallavas** repeatedly, and Pulakeshin II was ultimately defeated and killed when **Narasimhavarman I** sacked Badami around 642.

- **Vikramaditya I** recovered the kingdom and **Vikramaditya II** later sacked Kanchi in turn, though he notably spared its temples and left an inscription on the Kailasanatha, which is an unusual and citable act.
- Administration used the **maharaja and yuvaraja** hierarchy, provinces called **vishayas** and **rashttras**, and a system of feudatories, and land grants to Brahmins and temples are recorded extensively on copper plates.
- **Hiuen Tsang** visited the kingdom and described its people as proud, warlike and given to honour, which is the fullest outside account of Deccan society in the period.
- **Religious policy** was notably plural, since the Chalukyas patronised Shaivism and Vaishnavism while Jainism remained strong at Aihole and Badami, and Ravikirti who composed the Aihole inscription was himself a Jain.
- The dynasty fell to the **Rashtrakutas under Dantidurga** around 753, and the Western Chalukyas of Kalyani revived the line in the tenth century.

The Pallavas

The Tamil dynasty that created Dravida architecture and made Kanchi a centre of learning. The 2024 and 2025 questions both centred on their conflict with the Chalukyas.

- Pallava origins are obscure and contested, with the dynasty emerging from the third century and reaching prominence under **Simhavishnu** around 575.
- **Mahendravarman I**, ruling from about 600, was a scholar-king who wrote the Sanskrit farce **Mattavilasa Prahasana**, converted from Jainism to Shaivism under Appar's influence, and initiated rock-cut architecture.
- **Narasimhavarman I Mamalla**, ruling from about 630, avenged his father's defeat by capturing Badami around 642, and Mamallapuram is named for him.
- Naval capability distinguished the Pallavas, and Narasimhavarman I sent expeditions to Sri Lanka in support of the Sinhalese prince Manavarma, so southern maritime power predates the Cholas.
- **Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha** built the Kailasanatha at Kanchi and the Shore Temple at Mamallapuram, moving from rock-cut to structural building.
- **Kanchipuram** became a major centre of learning, with the **Ghatika** as its educational institution, and Hiuen Tsang and later Dandin both attest its intellectual standing.
- Administration ran through **kottams** and **nadus**, with local assemblies of the **sabha** and **ur** type that the Cholas later developed further, and the **Uttaramerur** village whose inscriptions are famous was a Pallava brahmadeya foundation.
- **Land grants** to Brahmins and temples are recorded from the Pallava period onwards in large numbers, and R. S. Sharma's feudalism argument draws heavily on this southern evidence.
- **Ghatika at Kanchi** attracted students from across the peninsula and from Southeast Asia, and Dignaga the Buddhist logician and Dandin the Sanskrit poet are both associated with the city, which makes Kanchi the southern counterpart of Nalanda.
- Decline came through the long wars with the Chalukyas and Pandyas, and the Cholas under **Aditya I** ended the dynasty around 897.

The Kadambas and the Vakatakas

Two smaller dynasties named in or adjacent to the syllabus. Both are frequently omitted and both carry easily citable specifics.

- **Kadambas** were founded by **Mayurasharman** around 345 at Banavasi in coastal Karnataka, and the traditional account has him abandoning Vedic study after a quarrel at Kanchi to raise an army.
- That origin story matters because it shows a **Brahmin founding a kshatriya dynasty**, which is direct evidence of varna flexibility in practice.
- **Kakusthavarman** is the best known ruler, and the **Talagunda pillar inscription** in Sanskrit is the dynasty's principal record.
- Kadamba significance is disproportionate to size, since they were the **first dynasty to use Kannada as an administrative language** in inscriptions, which begins the vernacular administrative tradition in the south.
- **Vakatakas** ruled the northern Deccan from the third to fifth centuries, and their most famous ruler is **Pravarasena II**, author of the Prakrit work Setubandha.
- The dynasty's link to the Guptas ran through **Prabhavatigupta**, daughter of Chandragupta II, who married Rudrasena II and ruled as regent for her sons for many years, which is an unusually well documented case of a woman exercising sovereign power.
- **Ajanta caves** in their most celebrated phase, caves 16, 17 and 19 among them, were excavated and painted under Vakataka patronage in the fifth century, and Cave 16 was donated by Varahadeva, minister of Harishena.
- **Ajanta chronology** falls into two phases, an early Satavahana-period Hinayana group of the second century BCE and the celebrated Mahayana group of the fifth century CE, and confusing the two is a frequent error in art answers.
- The Vakataka connection is worth stating because the Ajanta paintings are commonly credited loosely to the Gupta period, when the patronage was in fact Vakataka.

Art and architecture

Named twice in the syllabus, which signals its weight. This is where Dravida architecture is invented, and the sequence of stages is the standard question.

- **Mahendra style**, from about 610 to 640, produced the earliest Pallava rock-cut **mandapas**, pillared halls excavated into rock faces with plain massive pillars, at Mandagapattu and Mahendravadi.
- Mahendravarman's Mandagapattu inscription records that he built a temple without brick, timber, metal or mortar, which is the founding statement of the southern stone tradition.
- **Mamalla style**, from about 640 to 674, produced the **rathas** at Mamallapuram, monolithic temples carved from single boulders including the Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhima, Dharmaraja and Nakula-Sahadeva rathas.
- The rathas are examinable because they preserve **different architectural prototypes in stone**, including the apsidal, the barrel-vaulted and the tiered pyramidal forms, so they are a museum of temple types.

- **Open-air relief technique** at Mamallapuram is worth noting for its own sake, since the sculptors used a natural cleft in the rock as the descending river and positioned a cistern above it so that water actually flowed down the carved course on ceremonial occasions.
- **Descent of the Ganga** at Mamallapuram, an open-air relief about thirty metres long, is the largest rock relief in India and the outstanding sculpture of the period.
- **Rajasimha style**, from about 700, moves to **structural temples** built of dressed stone, and the **Shore Temple at Mamallapuram and the Kailasanatha at Kanchi** are the results.
- **Nandivarman style** in the eighth century produced the Vaikunthaperumal temple at Kanchi, and the sequence Mahendra, Mamalla, Rajasimha, Nandivarman is what an architecture question wants.
- **Chalukyan architecture** at **Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal** experimented deliberately with both northern and southern forms, and Aihole is called the cradle of Indian temple architecture for that reason.
- **Pattadakal** is the crucial site, since it contains both **Nagara-style temples such as Kashi Vishvanatha and Dravida-style temples such as Virupaksha**, side by side, and the Virupaksha directly inspired the Kailasa at Ellora.
- **Durga temple at Aihole** with its apsidal plan and peristyle, and the **Lad Khan** temple with its flat roof derived from wooden prototypes, are the two Aihole buildings to name.

Style	Approximate dates	Form	Type sites
Mahendra	c. 610-640	Rock-cut mandapas, plain pillars	Mandagapattu, Mahendravadi
Mamalla	c. 640-674	Monolithic rathas, relief sculpture	Mamallapuram
Rajasimha	c. 700-728	Structural temples in dressed stone	Shore Temple, Kailasanatha Kanchi
Nandivarman	c. 730-800	Smaller structural temples	Vaikunthaperumal, Kanchi

The Pallava architectural sequence. Naming the four stages in order answers most Pallava art questions.

Religion, literature and society

The Bhakti movement begins in this period and in these kingdoms, so the religious history here connects directly to the Cultural Traditions unit.

- **Alvars and Nayanars** flourished under Pallava and Pandya rule, and the Tamil devotional movement is therefore a product of exactly these kingdoms.
- **Decline of Jainism and Buddhism** in the Tamil country followed, with **Appar's** conversion of Mahendravarman I from Jainism and the tradition of Sambandar's confrontation with the Jains at Madurai marking the shift.
- Royal patronage moved decisively to **Shaivism and Vaishnavism**, and temple building became the principal expression of royal legitimacy.
- **Sanskrit** flourished under these courts, with **Dandin**, author of the Dashakumaracharita and the Kavyadarsha on poetics, associated with the Pallava court at Kanchi.
- **Bharavi**, author of the Kiratarjuniya, is linked to the Pallava or Chalukya courts, and Ravikirti's Aihole inscription shows kavya style used for a royal record.
- **Tamil** literature developed through the devotional corpora, and **Kannada** entered administration under the Kadambas and later literature under the Rashtrakutas.

- **Temple as an institution** takes shape here, receiving land grants, employing staff, and functioning as an economic centre, which is the pattern the Cholas then developed to its full extent.
- **Land grants** to Brahmins as **brahmadeya** and to temples as **devadana** proliferate from this period, and the resulting agrarian expansion into new areas is what Chattopadhyaya reads as integration rather than decline.
- **Grantha script**, developed under the Pallavas to write Sanskrit in the Tamil country, is the direct ancestor of the Malayalam and Tulu scripts and of several Southeast Asian writing systems including Khmer and Javanese.
- **Trade** continued through the west coast ports and across the Bay of Bengal, and Pallava contact with Southeast Asia contributed the **Pallava-derived script** from which several Southeast Asian writing systems descend.

Answering the questions

Three questions in four years, two of them on the Pallava-Chalukya conflict and one on art and literature. The pattern is clear.

- Conflict questions want **causes, course and consequences**, so give the Deccan-Tamil frontier and the Krishna-Tungabhadra doab as the object, the sequence of sackings of Badami and Kanchi, and the mutual exhaustion that let the Rashtrakutas and Cholas rise.
- Architecture questions should be answered by the **four-stage Pallava sequence** and by Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal for the Chalukyas, with Pattadakal's coexistence of Nagara and Dravida as the analytical point.
- **Rashtrakuta continuation** is worth a closing line in any Deccan answer, since Dantidurga and Krishna I inherited the Chalukyan architectural tradition directly and the Kailasa temple at Ellora is its monumental culmination, cut downward from living rock as a single monolith.
- Wherever the question permits, note the **inversion of weightage**, since this unit outscores the Guptas three to one and the answer should reflect where the substance is.
- Bring **Prabhavatigupta and the Vakataka patronage of Ajanta** into any answer on the period's art, because attributing Ajanta to the Guptas is a common and correctable error.
- **Mamallapuram as a port** is the practical explanation for its monuments, since it was the Pallava harbour trading with Southeast Asia, and the Shore Temple stood as a landmark visible from the sea.
- Use the **Aihole inscription** as a source rather than merely as a fact, since it is a Jain poet's Sanskrit kavya praising a Hindu king's defeat of a northern emperor, which tells you a great deal about the period in one document.

Last-mile revision

- Chalukyas of Badami from about 543; Pulakeshin II about 610-642 and the Aihole inscription by Ravikirti; defeats Harsha on the Narmada; Badami sacked by Narasimhavarman I about 642.
- Pallavas: Simhavishnu about 575, Mahendravarman I and the Mattavilasa Prahasana, Narasimhavarman I Mamalla, Rajasimha builds the Shore Temple and Kailasanatha; ended by Aditya Chola about 897.
- Kadambas: Mayurasharman about 345 at Banavasi, Talagunda inscription, first administrative use of Kannada.

- Vakatakas: Prabhavatigupta as regent, Ajanta caves 16, 17 and 19 under Vakataka patronage, Cave 16 by Varahadeva.
- Pallava sequence: Mahendra rock-cut, Mamalla rathas, Rajasimha structural, Nandivarman; Descent of the Ganga at Mamallapuram.
- Chalukyan sites: Aihole with Durga and Lad Khan, Badami, Pattadakal with Virupaksha in Dravida and Kashi Vishvanatha in Nagara.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating the Guptas as the main ancient dynasty. Across four papers this unit scored 45 marks and the Guptas 15.
- Attributing the Ajanta paintings to the Guptas. The great fifth century phase was under Vakataka patronage.
- Giving the Pallava styles out of order. The sequence is Mahendra, Mamalla, Rajasimha, Nandivarman.
- Saying the rathas are temples in use. They are monolithic models preserving several architectural prototypes and were never consecrated.
- Forgetting that Pattadakal contains both Nagara and Dravida temples, which is the single most interesting fact about Chalukyan architecture.

Mains Practice

Discuss the circumstances which led to the conflict between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas and how this rivalry shaped power dynamics in South India.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

Examine the course of Pallava-Chalukya conflicts between the sixth and eighth century CE.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

Is it correct to say that the post-Gupta period was remarkable for the expansion of religious cults in India?

15 marks · 200 words · 2023