

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional

Early Medieval India, 750-1200

Paper 1 · Unit 13

Feudalism, the Rajputs, the Cholas and the tripartite struggle: 75 marks in four years, and the unit UPSC keeps asking from Section B as well as Section A.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Early medieval India, 750 to 1200: polity, Pala, Pratihara, Rashtrakuta, Chola, Rajput states of North India, Gahadwal, Paramara, Chahamana, Chaulukya, Chandella, Sena, agrarian economy and urban settlements in east India and south India; society, status of the Brahman and the new social order; trade and commerce; religion, growth of temples and monastic institutions.

The Indian feudalism debate

The 2023 paper asked for the proponents of Indian feudalism by name, so this is not optional background. It is also the frame through which every other question in the unit is answered.

- **R. S. Sharma** in *Indian Feudalism* (1965) made the case: land grants to Brahmins and officials transferred revenue and administrative rights, creating a hierarchy of intermediaries, tying peasants to the soil, and producing a decline of trade, towns and coinage.
- **D. D. Kosambi** provided the earlier framework, distinguishing **feudalism from above**, where the state granted rights downward, from **feudalism from below**, where local chiefs accumulated power upward.
- **B. N. S. Yadava** extended Sharma's case for north India, and the model was supported by evidence of **paucity of coins**, the decay of urban centres such as Pataliputra, and the spread of self-sufficient village economies.
- **D. N. Jha** edited the standard collection of the debate, and **Irfan Habib** offered a partly sympathetic critique focused on whether the Indian evidence matches the European comparison.
- The critics are as examinable as the proponents. **Harbans Mukhia** asked whether Indian feudalism ever existed, arguing that the Indian peasant retained control of the production process and was never a serf in the European sense.
- **B. D. Chattopadhyaya** replaced decline with **integration**, arguing that the period saw agrarian expansion into new areas, the formation of new states through local lineages, and genuine urban growth rather than decay.
- **Ranabir Chakravarti** and others showed that trade did not collapse, since Indian Ocean commerce continued and the Arab trade expanded, so the coin paucity argument has been substantially weakened.
- The position to argue: land grants and intermediary hierarchies are real and well documented, the label feudalism imports European assumptions that fit imperfectly, and integration and state formation describe the period better than decline.

KEY TERMS

Feudalism from above — Kosambi's term for a state granting land and administrative rights downward, as against local chiefs accumulating power from below.

Samanta — A subordinate ruler or vassal owing tribute and military service, the characteristic political relationship of the period.

The tripartite struggle

Three powers fought for Kanauj for roughly a century. The examinable point is why Kanauj mattered and what the struggle cost all three.

- The **Gurjara-Pratiharas** of western India, the **Palas** of Bengal and Bihar, and the **Rashtrakutas** of the Deccan contested control of **Kanauj** from the late eighth to the tenth century.
- Kanauj mattered because it commanded the fertile upper Ganga doab and because Harsha's association had made it the symbolic capital of northern India, so possession conferred legitimacy as much as revenue.
- The **Pratiharas** under **Nagabhata I** are credited with checking Arab expansion from Sindh, and under **Mihira Bhoja** and **Mahendrapala** they held Kanauj and the largest north Indian empire of the period.
- Under **Dharmapala** and **Devapala**, the **Palas** patronised Buddhism, founded and sustained **Vikramashila** and supported **Nalanda**, and their cultural reach extended to Tibet and Southeast Asia through the monk Atisha.
- The **Rashtrakutas** under **Dhruva**, **Govinda III** and **Amoghavarsha** repeatedly intervened in the north from the Deccan, and Amoghavarsha's *Kavirajamarga* is an early landmark of Kannada literature.
- Writing in the tenth century, the Arab traveller **Al-Masudi** described the Rashtrakuta ruler as one of the four great kings of the world, which is useful outside evidence of their standing.
- The struggle **exhausted all three**, and the Pratihara collapse after the Rashtrakuta sack of Kanauj in the early tenth century left north India fragmented among the successor Rajput houses.
- Behind the whole tripartite period lies the **Arab conquest of Sindh in 712** and the failure of further Arab expansion eastward, and Pratihara resistance is the usual explanation offered for why the frontier held for three centuries.
- The consequence usually drawn, that this fragmentation left north India unable to resist the Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions, is defensible but should be stated as an argument rather than as an inevitability.

The Rajput states

Asked in 2026 on the theories of Rajput origin, which is a historiographical question. Learn the theories with their evidence and their weaknesses.

- The principal houses are the **Gahadavalas** of Kanauj, the **Paramaras** of Malwa, the **Chahamanas or Chauhans** of Sakambhari and Ajmer, the **Chaulukyas or Solankis** of Gujarat, the **Chandellas** of Bundelkhand, and the **Senas** of Bengal.
- Tradition begins with the **Agnikula** legend in Chand Bardai's *Prithviraj Raso*, which holds that four clans were born from a fire pit at Mount Abu, and it is a legitimisation myth rather than evidence of origin.
- The **foreign origin theory**, argued by Colonel **James Tod** and later by **William Crooke** and **V. A. Smith**, derived the Rajputs from Hunas, Scythians and other Central Asian groups absorbed into Indian society.
- Against them, the **indigenous origin theory** of **C. V. Vaidya** and **G. H. Ojha** held that they descended from Vedic Kshatriyas, and this is the position the 2026 question means by indigenous evidence contradicting European theorists.

- The evidence for indigeneity includes inscriptional genealogies claiming solar and lunar descent, the continuity of local place names and lineages, and the absence of any contemporary reference to foreign origin.
- Modern scholarship, associated with **B. D. Chattopadhyaya**, dissolves the question: Rajput is a **process rather than a race**, by which diverse groups including tribal chiefs, local landholders and pastoralists acquired Kshatriya status through political success, land control and Brahmanical validation.
- That process explains the Agnikula myth functionally: a genealogy was manufactured precisely because the claim to Kshatriya status needed legitimation.
- **Prithviraj Chauhan** and the battles of Tarain in 1191 and 1192 close the period, and the standard explanation of defeat, that Rajput armies fought for honour and territory rather than for annihilation while the Ghurids fought to conquer, is worth stating as an argument rather than as a truism.
- The political character of these states was **samanta-based**, with power distributed among clan kinsmen holding land in return for service, which gave military resilience and structural fragmentation at the same time.

The Chola state

Asked in 2026 on imperial power resting on administration, army and navy. The Cholas are the best documented Indian state before the Mughals because of their inscriptions.

- The dynasty was revived by **Vijayalaya** in the ninth century and reached its height under **Rajaraja I (985 to 1014)** and **Rajendra I (1014 to 1044)**.
- **Administrative efficiency** rested on a genuine revenue survey, a graded territorial hierarchy of mandalam, valanadu, nadu and ur, and unusually detailed record keeping preserved in temple inscriptions.
- **Local self-government** is the Chola distinctive, with the **ur** for ordinary villages, the **sabha** or mahasabha for brahmadeya villages, and the **nagaram** for merchant towns, and the **Uttaramerur** inscriptions record the kudavolai lot system and the qualifications and disqualifications for committee membership.
- The **army** was large and professional, with named regiments, elephant corps and cavalry using imported horses, and the **navy** is what makes the Cholas exceptional among Indian states.
- **Rajendra I's** naval expedition against **Srivijaya** around 1025, and the earlier conquest of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, made Chola power maritime in a way no other Indian dynasty achieved.
- The naval effort was tied to **trade**, since Srivijaya controlled the straits through which the China trade passed, and the merchant guild of the **Ayyavole Five Hundred** and the Manigramam operated with state backing.
- **Rajendra's** Gangetic expedition and the title Gangaikonda, with the new capital Gangaikondacholapuram, were legitimation exercises rather than attempts at northern conquest.
- **Burton Stein's** segmentary state model holds that Chola central authority was ritual rather than administrative, with real power at the nadu level, and **Y. Subbarayalu** and others have argued back from the inscriptions for a more substantive administration; naming both positions is what a strong answer does.

Agrarian economy and urban settlements

The syllabus names east India and south India specifically, and this section carries the evidence that decides the feudalism debate.

- **Land grants** are the central institution: **brahmadeya** to Brahmins, **agrahara** as a Brahmin settlement, **devadana** to temples, and secular grants to officials, all recorded on copper plates that are our best source.
- Grants typically transferred **revenue and administrative rights**, sometimes including the right to punish, which is what makes the feudalism argument plausible.
- **Agrarian expansion** into forest and tribal tracts accompanied the grants, since granted land was often uncultivated, and this is Chattopadhyaya's central point against the decline thesis.
- **Irrigation** developed regionally, with tank irrigation in the south, the **eri** systems of Tamil country maintained by village assemblies, and wells and canals elsewhere.
- **Urban settlements** did not uniformly decay: **Chattopadhyaya** identified the emergence of new towns from markets and administrative centres, and temple towns such as Thanjavur and Kanchipuram grew substantially.
- The **temple as an economic institution** is the key to southern urbanism, since it employed hundreds, held land, lent money and redistributed grain, making the temple town a genuine economic centre.
- **Trade** continued through the Arab merchants on the west coast, the guilds operating into Southeast Asia, and the Pala connection to Tibet and China, so the isolation implied by the feudalism model is not supported.
- **Ranabir Chakravarti** and **Meera Abraham** on merchant guilds, and the evidence of Arab geographers on the Malabar and Konkan ports, together show a west coast trade that was expanding rather than contracting through this period.
- **Coinage** was genuinely scarcer in north India in this period, which is the strongest single piece of evidence for the feudalism thesis, though the south continued to issue gold and the argument from silence has limits.

Society: caste, Brahmins and the new order

Named explicitly in the syllabus as the status of the Brahman and the new social order, so it can be asked directly.

- The period saw a marked **rise in Brahmin status and wealth**, driven by the grants, and Brahmin settlements became centres of learning, ritual authority and landholding at once.
- **Jati proliferation** accelerated, with occupational groups and absorbed tribal communities acquiring separate caste identities, so the varna scheme increasingly described the social order badly.
- **Kayasthas** emerged as a scribal and record-keeping caste, and their rise is directly connected to the administrative demands of grant-based government.
- The **shudra** category shifted in practice, with many shudras now cultivators rather than servants, which R. S. Sharma reads as evidence of a peasantised social order.
- **Untouchability** appears to have hardened, and the position of groups such as the Chandals is described in harsher terms in this period's texts than earlier.

- **Women's position** narrowed in the normative texts, with earlier marriage, restrictions on property and the beginnings of a wider practice of sati among elite groups, though inscriptional evidence shows women endowing temples and holding property.
- The **integration of tribal groups** into the caste order through Brahmanical validation of local deities and lineages is the social counterpart of the political Rajput process.
- **Regional identities** consolidated in this period, with the emergence of distinct linguistic and cultural regions, which is arguably the most lasting social outcome of the whole period.

Religion, temples and monastic institutions

Keep this brief because it overlaps with the Cultural Traditions unit, but the institutional angle belongs here rather than there.

- **Temple building** on a monumental scale is the period's signature, and the temple functioned simultaneously as a religious centre, a landlord, an employer and a bank.
- **Monastic institutions** included the great Buddhist establishments of **Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri and Somapura** under Pala patronage, and the Shaiva **mathas** that spread across the Deccan and the south.
- The **Shaiva Siddhanta** and the **Kalamukha and Pashupata** orders held substantial endowed property and ran teaching establishments, so Hindu monasticism was institutionally comparable to the Buddhist.
- **Buddhism declined** in India during this period, and the explanations to offer are the loss of royal patronage, absorption of Buddhist practice into Brahmanical worship, competition from Bhakti, and the destruction of the eastern monasteries at the end of the twelfth century.
- **Jainism** remained strong in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Karnataka under Chaulukya and Hoysala patronage, and the Dilwara and Ranakpur temples belong to this tradition.
- **Tantra** grew across Buddhist, Shaiva and Shakta traditions, and it is significant because it offered a religious idiom accessible outside Brahmanical ritual and drew on local and tribal practice.
- **Land grants to temples** rose sharply in the Chola period, and the Thanjavur inscriptions record the exact endowments, personnel and wages, which is why the southern temple is the best documented economic institution in early medieval India.
- The **Bhakti** movement in the Tamil country matured in this period and began its northward transmission, which is treated fully in the Cultural Traditions unit.

Last-mile revision

- Feudalism: Sharma 1965 and Kosambi's above and below; Yadava extends; Mukhia asks whether it existed; Chattopadhyaya offers integration instead.
- Tripartite struggle for Kanauj: Pratiharas, Palas, Rashtrakutas; Nagabhata I checks the Arabs; Al-Masudi on the Rashtrakuta king.
- Rajput theories: Agnikula myth, foreign origin from Tod and Smith, indigenous from Vaidya and Ojha, process not race from Chattopadhyaya.
- Cholas: Vijayalaya, Rajaraja I 985-1014, Rajendra I 1014-44, Srivijaya expedition about 1025, Uttaramerur and kudavolai, ur sabha nagaram.

- Grants: brahmadeya, agrahara, devadana; Stein's segmentary state versus Subbarayalu's substantive administration.
- Society: Brahmin status rises, jatis proliferate, Kayasthas emerge, untouchability hardens, regional identities consolidate.

Common errors to avoid

- Presenting Indian feudalism as established fact. Mukhia and Chattopadhyaya are essential counterweights and the 2023 question asked for the proponents precisely because there is a debate.
- Treating Rajput origin as a real historical question with a right answer. The modern position is that Rajput is a process of status acquisition, not a race.
- Describing Chola local government as democracy. Kudavolai selected by lot from qualified candidates with substantial property and literacy requirements.
- Saying towns and trade collapsed. The coin evidence is real for north India but Chattopadhyaya and Chakravarti have shown urban and commercial growth elsewhere.
- Explaining Buddhism's decline by invasion alone. Loss of patronage, absorption and Bhakti competition were all at work well before 1200.

Mains Practice

Critically examine the theories on the origin of the Rajputs. How do indigenous evidences contradict the European theorists?

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

“The dynamics of social mobility in early medieval India were shaped by a complex interplay of caste hierarchies, religious legitimation, economic transformation and political patronage.” Critically assess.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

Examine the role played by the Agraharas in the promotion of education in early medieval India.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

“The success of the Cholas as an imperial power rested not only on administrative efficiency, but also on a well-organized army and a formidable navy.” Evaluate.

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

Discuss the various proponents of Indian feudalism.

10 marks · 150 words · 2023