

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Cultural Traditions in India, 750-1200

Paper 1 • Unit 14

Temple architecture, philosophy, literature and the beginnings of Bhakti between 750 and 1200: 100 marks in four years, and the biggest block of textual marks in Paper 1 alongside its twin unit on early medieval society.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Cultural traditions in India, 750 to 1200: philosophy, Shankaracharya and Vedanta, Ramanuja and Vishishtadvaita, Madhva and Brahma-Mimamsa; religion, forms and features of religion, Tamil devotional cult, growth of Bhakti, Islam and its arrival in India, Sufism; literature, Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Newari and Apabhramsa; art and architecture, temple architecture, Nagara, Dravida and Vesara, sculpture, painting.

The Acharya Triumvirate and the Vedanta debate

Asked directly in 2024. The three Acharyas are not three opinions about God; they are three answers to one technical question about the relation between Brahman, the individual self and the world. Get the technical terms right and the answer writes itself.

- **Shankaracharya**, conventionally dated to the early eighth century, propounded **Advaita**, non-dualism: Brahman alone is real, the world is **maya** in the sense of being dependently real rather than simply illusory, and the individual self is identical with Brahman.
- Shankara's key concepts are **vivarta**, apparent transformation as against real transformation, the distinction between **paramarthika** and **vyavaharika** levels of truth, and **adhyasa**, superimposition, which explains why we mistake the self for the body.
- He wrote commentaries or bhashyas on the Brahma Sutras, the principal Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, and is credited with establishing the four **mathas** at Sringeri, Puri, Dwarka and Badrinath, and with organising the **Dashanami** monastic order.
- **Ramanuja**, eleventh to twelfth century, propounded **Vishishtadvaita**, qualified non-dualism: Brahman is real and so are selves and matter, but they exist as the body of Brahman, which makes the relation one of qualified identity rather than pure identity.
- Ramanuja's central move is that **bhakti** and **prapatti**, self-surrender, are valid paths to liberation, which gave devotional religion a rigorous philosophical foundation and opened it below the twice-born.
- His works include the **Sri Bhashya** on the Brahma Sutras and the **Vedantha Sangraha**, and he is associated with Srirangam and with the Sri Vaishnava tradition that grew from the Alvars.
- **Madhva**, thirteenth century, propounded **Dvaita**, dualism, sometimes called **Brahma Mimamsa**: Brahman and the individual selves are eternally and really distinct, and liberation is proximity to God rather than identity with him.
- Madhva's system includes the doctrine of **panchabheda**, five real differences, between God and self, God and matter, self and self, self and matter, and matter and matter, and he is associated with Udupi.
- The examinable relation: all three write commentaries on the same Brahma Sutras and disagree about the same text, so a strong answer compares their readings of a shared source rather than summarising three biographies.
- Later positions extend the sequence, with **Nimbarka's** Dvaitadvaita and **Vallabha's** Shuddhadvaita, and mentioning them shows the debate did not close with Madhva.

Acharya	School	Relation of self to Brahman	Path emphasised
Shankara	Advaita	Identical; difference is superimposition	Jnana, knowledge
Ramanuja	Vishishtadvaita	Real but inseparable, self as body of Brahman	Bhakti and prapatti
Madhva	Dvaita	Eternally and really distinct	Bhakti with divine grace

The three Acharyas on the same question. The relation column is what an examiner reads for.

KEY TERMS

Maya — In Shankara, the principle by which the one Brahman appears as many; dependently real, not simply non-existent.

Prapatti — Total self-surrender to God, admitted by Ramanuja as a path open to those barred from Vedic study.

Panchabheda — Madhva's five irreducible real differences, the technical core of Dvaita.

The Tamil devotional cult and the growth of Bhakti

The Bhakti movement is asked in almost every cycle, in 2023 as a direct question on tenets, spread and impact. The essential move is to start it in the Tamil country and not in fifteenth century north India.

- The **Alvars**, twelve Vaishnava poet saints, and the **Nayanars**, sixty three Shaiva saints, composed in Tamil between roughly the sixth and ninth centuries, before the period of this unit but supplying its foundation.
- Alvar verse was collected as the **Nalayira Divya Prabandham**, about four thousand verses, and given the status of a Tamil Veda within Sri Vaishnavism.
- The Nayanar corpus, the **Tevaram** of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar together with Manikkavachakar's **Tiruvachakam**, forms part of the Shaiva **Tirumurai**.
- Social composition matters here and is frequently the point of a question: the saints included **Nandanar**, of low caste, and **Andal**, the only woman among the Alvars, so the movement carried a critique of hierarchy from the start.
- Devotion in Tamil rather than Sanskrit was itself an argument, since it asserted that the vernacular could carry the sacred and that access to God did not require ritual expertise.
- In the Kannada country, **Basavanna** in the twelfth century founded the **Virashaiva or Lingayat** movement, whose **vachana** literature by Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi and Allama Prabhu rejected temple worship, caste and Brahmanical ritual.
- The **Anubhava Mantapa** associated with Basavanna functioned as an assembly in which women and men of all occupations debated, which is the strongest institutional expression of the movement's egalitarianism.
- Northward transmission ran through Ramananda's lineage and later produced **Kabir, Nanak, Mirabai, Surdas and Tulsidas**, but the fifteenth and sixteenth century north Indian Bhakti belongs to later units; the examiner wants continuity, not conflation.
- The standard scholarly distinction is between **saguna** bhakti, devotion to God with attributes and form, and **nirguna** bhakti, devotion to the formless, with the Tamil saints and Ramanuja on the saguna side and Kabir and Nanak later on the nirguna side.

- Impact is what an answer must argue: Bhakti produced vernacular literatures, softened but did not abolish caste barriers, generated durable institutions including the mathas and later the Sikh Panth, and provided the language in which later reform movements framed themselves.

KEY TERMS

Vachana — The short, aphoristic Kannada free verse form used by the Virashaiva saints; literally a saying.

Nalayira Divya Prabandham — The collection of about four thousand Alvar verses, treated within Sri Vaishnavism as the Tamil Veda.

The arrival of Islam and early Sufism

The syllabus places the arrival of Islam here, which surprises candidates who expect it in the Delhi Sultanate unit. Treat it as a story of coasts and trade before it is a story of conquest.

- Arab traders were present on the **Malabar and Konkan coasts** from the seventh century, and the earliest Indian mosques, including the Cheraman Juma Masjid tradition in Kerala, belong to that commercial contact rather than to conquest.
- **Muhammad bin Qasim's conquest of Sindh in 712** established the first Muslim political authority in the subcontinent, and its administrative accommodation of Hindus and Buddhists as protected communities set an early precedent.
- The **Ghaznavid raids** from 1000 to 1027 under Mahmud of Ghazni were extractive rather than territorial except in Punjab, and the destruction of Somnath in 1025 became a symbol used and reused politically ever since.
- The **Ghurid conquest** after the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 established durable political power, which properly belongs to the Thirteenth Century unit.
- **Sufism** entered with and before conquest, and the two orders that matter for this period are the **Chishti** and the **Suhrawardi**.
- The **Chishti** order, established in India by **Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti** at Ajmer in the late twelfth century, refused state patronage and land grants, kept its khanqahs open, and used **sama**, devotional music, which made it socially permeable.
- Established by Bahauddin Zakariya at Multan, the **Suhrawardi** order took the opposite view, accepting state patronage and property, which made it politically influential and socially narrower.
- The Sufi vocabulary an answer needs is **khanqah** for the hospice, **pir** and **murid** for master and disciple, **silsila** for the spiritual chain, **wahdat-al-wujud** for the unity of being associated with Ibn Arabi, and **urs** for the death anniversary observance.
- Contact with Bhakti is real but should be stated carefully: both used vernacular idiom, both privileged personal experience over ritual expertise, and both attracted followers across communal lines, but the doctrinal systems are distinct and claiming a merger overstates the evidence.

KEY TERMS

Khanqah — A Sufi hospice serving as residence, teaching centre and open kitchen; the Chishti khanqah was deliberately accessible.

Wahdat-al-wujud — The doctrine of the unity of being, associated with Ibn Arabi, which some Indian Sufis read as compatible with Advaita.

Temple architecture: Nagara, Dravida and Vesara

The 2024 paper asked for the features of the Vesara style and the 2026 paper asked about Hoysala architecture, so this section carries recurring marks. Learn the vocabulary in both the northern and southern registers, because the same element has two names.

- The **Nagara** style of northern India is identified by the curvilinear **shikhara** rising over the sanctum, a square plan with projections producing a cruciform outline, and the absence of an enclosing boundary wall with gateways.
- Nagara sub-styles include **Latina**, a single curved shikhara; **Phamsana**, broader and shorter with a straighter slope; and **Shekhari** and **Valabhi** variants, with the Shekhari carrying subsidiary spirelets clustered on the main tower.
- Regional Nagara schools worth naming are the **Odishan or Kalinga** school at Bhubaneswar, Konark and Puri, with the **deul** sanctuary and **jagamohana** porch; the **Khajuraho or Chandela** school with its integrated platform and continuous horizontal bands of sculpture; and the **Solanki** school in Gujarat with the stepwell tradition, of which Rani ki Vav at Patan is the finest.
- The **Dravida** style of the south is identified by the pyramidal **vimana** in receding tiers, a walled enclosure, monumental gateway **gopurams** that grew to dominate later temples, a pillared **mandapa**, and a temple tank.
- Southern vocabulary differs from Nagara: **garbhagriha** is shared, but the tower is a vimana not a shikhara, the crowning member is the **shikhara** in southern usage and the finial the **stupi** or kalasha.
- The **Chola** temples represent Dravida at its most monumental, with the **Brihadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur** built by Rajaraja I around 1010 with a vimana of about sixty six metres, and the Gangaikondacholapuram and Airavatesvara temples completing the trio of Great Living Chola Temples.
- In the Deccan, the **Vesara** style developed under the **Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas and above all the Later Chalukyas of Kalyani and the Hoysalas**, is a genuine hybrid rather than a compromise.
- Vesara features to state precisely: a stellate or star-shaped plan produced by rotating a square, a tower that keeps the tiered horizontal courses of Dravida while adopting a curvilinear northern profile, reduced height with greatly increased sculptural density, and a raised platform or **jagati** for circumambulation.
- The **Hoysala** temples at **Belur, Halebidu and Somanathapura**, twelfth to thirteenth century, are the Vesara climax: soapstone permitting extremely fine carving, lathe-turned pillars, multiple shrines on one platform in dvikuta and trikuta arrangements, and named sculptors signing their work.
- That last detail is worth a line in any Hoysala answer, since the signatures of sculptors such as Malitamma are among the few places in Indian art where the artist is individually recorded.

Style	Region	Tower	Plan	Type sites
Nagara	North India	Curvilinear shikhara	Square with projections, no enclosure wall	Khajuraho, Bhubaneswar, Modhera
Dravida	Tamil country	Tiered pyramidal vimana	Walled enclosure with gopurams and tank	Thanjavur, Gangaikondacholapuram
Vesara	Deccan	Tiered courses with curvilinear profile	Stellate on a raised jagati	Belur, Halebidu, Somanathapura, Lakkundi

The three temple styles. The plan and the tower profile are the two discriminators to state first.

KEY TERMS

Jagati — The raised platform on which Hoysala and later Chalukyan temples stand, providing an elevated circumambulatory path.

Stellate plan — A star-shaped ground plan generated by rotating a square about its centre, characteristic of Hoysala temples.

Trikuta — A three-shrine temple sharing a common mandapa, as at the Chennakesava complex and Somanathapura.

Sculpture and painting

Usually a sub-part rather than a full question, but it appears often enough to need a prepared paragraph. Organise it by school, not by chronology.

- **Chola bronzes** are the outstanding achievement of the period, cast by the **cire perdue** or lost wax method, with the **Nataraja** of Shiva as Lord of the Dance the definitive image.
- The Nataraja iconography is dense and examinable: the **damaru** of creation, the **agni** of destruction, the **abhaya mudra** of protection, the raised foot of liberation, the dwarf **Apasmara** of ignorance underfoot, and the **prabhavali** ring of flame.
- **Pala** sculpture in eastern India worked in black basalt and in bronze at centres associated with Nalanda and Kurkihar, and its Buddhist and Brahmanical images transmitted an Indian idiom to Nepal, Tibet and Southeast Asia.
- Khajuraho and Konark sculpture is architectural rather than free standing, with continuous registers of divine, courtly and erotic imagery; the **mithuna** figures are best explained by reference to auspiciousness and to Tantric currents rather than by the sensational readings that circulate.
- In painting, the **Pala manuscript tradition** on palm leaf, illustrating texts such as the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita, is the principal eastern school and the ancestor of later eastern Indian manuscript painting.
- In the west, the **Jain manuscript tradition** of Gujarat and Rajasthan, producing Kalpasutra and Kalakacharyakatha manuscripts, developed the distinctive angular profile with the projecting further eye, and moved from palm leaf to paper in the fourteenth century.
- Mural painting continued in the south, with the Chola murals in the ambulatory of the Brihadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur rediscovered beneath later Nayaka overpainting.
- The **Ellora** rock-cut complex spans this period at its start, and the **Kailasa temple** at Ellora, excavated under Rashtrakuta Krishna I in the eighth century as a monolith cut downward from the rock, is the single most cited technical achievement of Indian architecture.

Literature in Sanskrit and the regional languages

The syllabus names Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Newari and Apabhramsa explicitly, which is unusual and means the vernaculars are examinable in their own right rather than as an afterthought to Sanskrit.

- Sanskrit remained the language of philosophy, science and courtly literature, with **Kalhana's Rajatarangini** (1148) the outstanding historical work of the period and the nearest thing in Sanskrit to a critical chronicle.
- Other Sanskrit landmarks include **Bilhana's Vikramankadevacharita**, **Jayadeva's Gita Govinda** in the twelfth century, which shaped devotional literature and dance across India, and the continuing tradition of commentary and shastra.
- **Tamil** produced the devotional corpora already described together with **Kamban's Ramavataram** in the twelfth century, a retelling rather than a translation of the Ramayana and a canonical work in its own right.
- **Kannada** literature achieved classical status in this period, with the **three gems**, Pampa, Ponna and Ranna, in the tenth century under Rashtrakuta and Chalukya patronage, and the Virashaiva vachanas from the twelfth century.
- **Malayalam** emerged as distinct from Tamil during this period, with the **Ramacharitam**, usually dated to about the twelfth century, conventionally treated as its earliest substantial literary work.
- **Telugu** entered literature with **Nannaya's** Mahabharata translation in the eleventh century, and the Kavitrயam tradition continued with Tikkana and Errana in following centuries.
- **Apabhramsa**, the late Middle Indo-Aryan stage between Prakrit and the modern north Indian languages, carried a substantial Jain literature, including the works of **Svayambhu** and **Pushpadanta**, and is the linguistic bridge to Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi.
- **Newari** in the Kathmandu valley developed a literature under the Malla period, and the syllabus's inclusion of it is a reminder that the Indic cultural world extended into the Himalaya.
- The examinable generalisation: this period is when the major Dravidian and several Indo-Aryan literatures acquire independent classical status, so the story is the rise of the vernacular as a vehicle of high culture, driven substantially by devotional religion.

Patronage and the temple as an institution

This is the analytical section that lifts an answer above description. The temple in this period is not only a building; it is a landlord, an employer, a bank and a redistributive centre, which is why architecture belongs in the same answer as economy.

- **Chola inscriptions**, particularly at Thanjavur and Uttaramerur, record temple endowments in enough detail to reconstruct landholding, irrigation, wages and assembly procedure, and they are the single richest source for the period.
- Temples received **devadana** grants of land, held livestock, employed hundreds of servants including musicians, dancers and accountants, and lent money at recorded rates of interest.
- The **Uttaramerur inscriptions** of Parantaka I record the **kudavolai** system by which village assembly members were chosen by lot from qualified candidates, and they are the standard evidence for Chola local self-government.

- Assembly vocabulary to keep straight: **ur** for the general village assembly, **sabha** or **mahasabha** for the brahmadeya village assembly, and **nagaram** for the merchant assembly.
- **Brahmadeya** and **agrahara** grants to Brahmins, and **devadana** grants to temples, transferred revenue rights and are the mechanism by which the temple became an economic institution.
- Merchant guilds, above all the **Ayyavole Five Hundred** of Aihole and the **Manigramam**, endowed temples and financed the Chola maritime expansion, tying religious patronage to Indian Ocean trade.
- **Burton Stein's** segmentary state model reads the Chola polity as ritually rather than administratively integrated, with the temple as the mechanism of that ritual integration, and it is the most citable interpretive frame here.
- The counter-position, argued by **Y. Subbarayalu** and others working from the inscriptions, is that Chola administration was more substantive than Stein allows, with real revenue machinery and territorial units.
- The connection to make explicit in an answer: royal legitimacy was manufactured through temple building, so the scale of Thanjavur or Belur is a political statement about the patron as much as a religious one.

KEY TERMS

Brahmadeya — A grant of land or revenue rights to Brahmins, often creating a new settlement with its own sabha.

Kudavolai — The Uttaramerur procedure of drawing names from a pot to select village committee members from qualified candidates.

Ayyavole Five Hundred — The powerful merchant guild of Aihole, active across the Deccan and overseas, and a major temple patron.

What the examiner is actually testing

Six questions came from this unit in four years, and reading them together shows a consistent preference. Notice that none of them asks for a description alone.

- The 2026 Hoysala question asked you to **illustrate with examples**, which means named temples with named features, not a general account of Deccan architecture.
- In 2024 the Vesara question asked for **main features**, so a list organised by plan, tower, platform and sculptural density scores better than a chronological narrative.
- The 2023 Bhakti question asked for **tenets, spread and impact** in one answer, which is a three part structure the answer should visibly follow.
- That year's Acharya Triumvirate question asked for **contributions to Indian Vedanta**, which invites comparison of their readings of the Brahma Sutras rather than three separate accounts.
- The 2025 question on art and literature asked for **major stages** and how they **reflected broader changes in society and patronage**, so the temple as institution section is what that question is really about.
- Across all six the pattern holds: name the object, state the feature precisely with its technical term, then connect it to patronage, society or the philosophical debate. Description alone caps a script in the middle band.

- Because this unit crosses into Section B of the paper, as the 2024 Vesara and Acharya questions did, do not treat it as ancient-only material that you can leave behind when you start medieval preparation.

Last-mile revision

- Shankara Advaita and vivarta, Ramanuja Vishishtadvaita and prapatti, Madhva Dvaita and panchabheda; all three commented on the Brahma Sutras.
- Alvars twelve Vaishnava, Nayanars sixty three Shaiva; Nalayira Divya Prabandham and Tevaram; Andal the woman Alvar, Nandanar the low caste Nayanar.
- Basavanna and the Virashaivas, vachana literature, Anubhava Mantapa, twelfth century Karnataka.
- Chishti order Ajmer, refused patronage, used sama; Suhrawardi at Multan, accepted patronage.
- Nagara curvilinear shikhara no enclosure; Dravida tiered vimana with gopuram and tank; Vesara stellate plan on a jagati with tiered curvilinear tower.
- Brihadeeswarar Thanjavur, Rajaraja I, about 1010, vimana about sixty six metres; Hoysala at Belur, Halebidu, Somanathapura in soapstone with signed sculptors.
- Kailasa at Ellora, Rashtrakuta Krishna I, eighth century, monolithic and cut downward.
- Kalhana Rajatarangini 1148, Jayadeva Gita Govinda twelfth century, Kamban Ramavataram, Kannada three gems Pampa Ponna Ranna, Nannaya for Telugu, Ramacharitam for Malayalam.
- Uttaramerur and kudavolai for Chola local government; ur, sabha and nagaram as the three assembly types.

Common errors to avoid

- Dating the Bhakti movement to the fifteenth century. It begins with the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars from about the sixth century; Kabir and Nanak are a later phase.
- Translating maya as illusion without qualification. Shankara's maya is dependently real, and the crude translation loses the whole argument.
- Calling Vesara a mixture of Nagara and Dravida and stopping there. Name the stellate plan, the jagati and the sculptural density, or the answer says nothing specific.
- Using shikhara and vimana interchangeably. The shikhara is the northern curvilinear tower; the vimana is the southern tiered pyramid.
- Attributing the Kailasa temple at Ellora to the Chalukyas. It is Rashtrakuta, under Krishna I.
- Treating Sufism as arriving only with the Delhi Sultanate. Moinuddin Chishti reached Ajmer in the late twelfth century and Arab contact on the Malabar coast is far older.
- Claiming Bhakti and Sufism merged. They interacted and borrowed idiom; the doctrinal systems remained distinct and overstating the fusion is a common examiner complaint.
- Writing architecture without patronage. The 2025 question explicitly asked about patterns of patronage, and pure description does not answer it.

Mains Practice

“Hoysala temple architecture marks a distinctive and innovative phase in the evolution of South Indian art and architecture.” Illustrate with examples.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

Analyze the contributions of the Acharya Triumvirate to Indian Vedanta.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

Analyze the tenets, spread and impact of the Bhakti Movement.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

Critically evaluate the major stages in the development of art and literature in early medieval India.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

How far did temple architecture under the Cholas become more refined and grandiose than earlier South Indian styles?

15 marks · 200 words · 2023

Illustrate the main features of Vesara style temple architecture.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024