

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional The Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century

Paper 1 • Unit 18

Vijayanagara, the Bahmanis, the regional sultanates and the Lodis: 60 marks in four years, and the century when the Deccan and the provinces outshone Delhi.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

The fifteenth and early sixteenth century, political developments and economy: rise of provincial dynasties, Bengal, Kashmir, Gujarat, Malwa, Jaunpur; the Lodis; the Sangam, Saluva and Tuluva dynasties of Vijayanagara; Bahmanids; the Sultanate of Gujarat; Mahmud Begarha; foundation of the Portuguese estado da India.

The provincial dynasties

Delhi's collapse after Timur produced not a vacuum but a set of confident regional states, each with its own architecture, language and court culture. That plurality is the century's defining feature.

- **Bengal** under the Ilyas Shahi and later Husain Shahi dynasties became effectively independent from 1338, patronised Bengali literature, and produced the curved do-chala roof and terracotta ornament that later entered imperial architecture as the bangaldar form.
- **Alauddin Husain Shah**, ruling from 1493, is remembered for patronage of Bengali translation of Sanskrit works and for the tolerant climate in which Chaitanya's Vaishnavism flourished.
- **Kashmir** under **Zain-ul-Abidin**, called Bud Shah and ruling from 1420, abolished jizya, recalled exiled Brahmins, sponsored Persian translation of the Rajatarangini and Mahabharata, and encouraged shawl weaving, papermaking and carpet crafts.
- **Jaunpur** under the Sharqi sultans became a centre of learning called the Shiraz of the East, and its architecture is distinguished by the massive propylon screen at the Atala and Jama Masjids, which dispenses with minarets entirely.
- **Malwa** at Mandu produced the austere and well proportioned **Jahaz Mahal, Hindola Mahal and Hoshang Shah's tomb**, the last in marble and reportedly studied by Shah Jahan's architects.
- **Gujarat** under Ahmad Shah, who founded Ahmedabad in 1411, developed the finest stone carving of the period, absorbing Jain and Hindu craft traditions into mosque architecture.
- **Mahmud Begarha**, ruling Gujarat from 1458 to 1511, is named in the syllabus, conquered Girnar and Champaner, patronised Gujarati and Persian letters, and confronted the Portuguese at sea.
- **Rajasthan** belongs in the list too, with Rana Kumbha of Mewar building the Vijaya Stambha at Chittor and the fort at Kumbhalgarh, and with Rajput states consolidating as the Sultanate receded.
- Common to all of them is the pattern the examiner wants named: **political fragmentation produced cultural efflorescence**, because each court needed to legitimate itself through patronage rather than through descent from Delhi.

The Lodis and the end of the Sultanate

The 2026 paper asked why Alauddin Alam Shah's abdication in favour of Bahlol Lodi did not immediately establish the dynasty, which is a question about Afghan political culture.

- Sayyid rule after Timur was nominal, and **Alauddin Alam Shah** withdrew to Badaun in 1448, effectively surrendering Delhi to his governor Bahlol Lodi.
- Bahlol did not proclaim a new dynasty immediately because Afghan political tradition treated the chief as **first among equals** rather than as sovereign, and his authority depended on the consent of Afghan clan leaders.

- That tribal conception is the answer to the 2026 question: Bahlol sat on a carpet with his nobles rather than a throne, addressed them as peers, and consolidated by distributing territory to Afghan clans rather than by asserting supremacy.
- **Sikandar Lodi**, ruling from 1489, centralised more successfully, founded Agra in 1504 as a forward capital, introduced the **gaz-i-sikandari** measure, and improved revenue administration.
- Sikandar's religious policy was harsher than his predecessor's, with temple destruction recorded and restrictions on Hindu practice, and it is a corrective to any assumption that the Sultanate mellowed steadily over time.
- **Ibrahim Lodi**, from 1517, attempted to impose a Persianate conception of absolute kingship on an Afghan nobility that did not accept it, and the resulting revolts destroyed his support.
- **Daulat Khan Lodi** of Punjab and Ibrahim's uncle Alam Khan invited **Babur**, which is how the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 came about, so the dynasty fell to its own constitutional contradiction.
- **Sher Shah Suri**, though slightly later, is the Afghan ruler who solved this problem by combining tribal legitimacy with a centralised revenue and road administration, and his brief reign supplies the template Akbar inherited.
- Afghan versus Turkish conceptions of kingship is the transferable idea here, and it recurs with Sher Shah and again with the Afghan nobility under the Mughals.

KEY TERMS

First among equals — The Afghan tribal conception of chiefship, in which the ruler governs by consent of clan leaders rather than by sovereign right.

Vijayanagara: the three dynasties

The 2026 paper asked about Krishnadevaraya through Domingo Paes. Vijayanagara is examined through foreign accounts more often than through its own records, so know both.

- Founded in 1336 by **Harihara and Bukka** on the Tungabhadra, the **Sangam dynasty** ruled to 1485, and the traditional account of their conversion and return through the sage Vidyaranya is legend rather than documented fact.
- **Saluva** and then **Tuluva** dynasties followed, the latter producing **Krishnadevaraya**, who ruled from 1509 to 1529 and is the period's outstanding Indian ruler by most measures.
- Krishnadevaraya defeated the Gajapatis of Orissa, checked the Bahmani successor states, wrote the Telugu **Amuktamalyada** on statecraft, and patronised the **ashtadiggajas**, the eight Telugu poets of his court.
- **Nayankara** system granted territory to military chiefs called nayakas in return for troops and tribute, and the **ayagar** system provided hereditary village officials, together forming the state's administrative spine.
- Nayankara's long-term effect was corrosive, since nayakas became hereditary and after Talikota emerged as the independent Nayaka kingdoms of Madurai, Tanjore and Gingee.
- Revenue rested on **land tax with elaborate classification**, on trade duties, on professional taxes, and Vijayanagara's control of the west coast ports gave it access to the horse trade that its cavalry required.

- **Talikota in 1565**, in which the combined Deccan sultanates defeated Rama Raya, was followed by the systematic destruction of the capital, and Hampi's ruins date from that sack.
- Foreign accounts are the richest source: **Nicolo Conti, Abdur Razzaq, Domingo Paes, Fernao Nuniz and Duarte Barbosa** all described the city, and Paes compared it to Rome in size and praised its markets and irrigation.
- **Hampi** as an archaeological site confirms much of what the travellers describe, with its bazaar streets, tank systems, the Vitthala temple with its stone chariot and musical pillars, and the royal enclosure, so text and archaeology can be read against each other.
- For the 2026 question, Paes's account supplies socio-economic evidence on markets, water works, the army and court ritual, and its value lies in describing what an Indian chronicler would have thought too ordinary to record.

The Bahmani kingdom and its successors

Founded within a decade of Vijayanagara and its permanent antagonist. The Bahmani story is also the story of Persianate culture taking root in the Deccan.

- Established in 1347 by **Alauddin Bahman Shah** after a revolt against Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the kingdom was centred first at Gulbarga and later at Bidar.
- **Mahmud Gawan**, chief minister from 1466 to 1481, is the outstanding administrator, reorganising the provinces from four to eight **tarafs**, tightening revenue assessment and founding the madrasa at Bidar that still stands.
- Gawan's execution in 1481, engineered by the rival faction, illustrates the fatal division of the Bahmani nobility between **Deccanis**, long settled, and **Afaqis or Pardesis**, recent immigrants from Persia and Central Asia.
- That factional split destroyed the kingdom, which fragmented between 1490 and 1518 into five successor sultanates: **Ahmadnagar, Bijapur, Golconda, Bidar and Berar**.
- Successor states are examinable in their own right, particularly **Bijapur's Adil Shahis**, who built the Gol Gumbaz with its enormous dome and whispering gallery, and **Golconda's Qutb Shahis**, who founded Hyderabad in 1591 and built the Charminar.
- **Ibrahim Adil Shah II** of Bijapur patronised Hindu and Muslim traditions alike and wrote the **Kitab-i-Nauras** in Dakhni, and his court is the clearest case of Deccani syncretism.
- **Dakhni Urdu** developed here well before Delhi adopted it, and Quli Qutb Shah of Golconda is generally regarded as the first substantial poet in the language.
- Deccani painting at Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Golconda ran parallel to Mughal painting with a richer palette and more fantastic landscape, drawing directly on Persian and Turkish models.

Economy and trade

Named in the syllabus alongside political developments, and it is where the century looks most dynamic.

- Agriculture expanded under regional states that had every incentive to raise local revenue, and Vijayanagara's tank and canal irrigation in the Tungabhadra basin was among the largest such systems of its time.

- **Horse imports** dominated the balance of trade for the southern states, since neither Vijayanagara nor the Bahmanis could breed adequate cavalry mounts, and Arab and Persian horses came through Goa, Bhatkal and Cambay.
- Control of the horse trade was therefore a strategic objective, and the Portuguese later exploited exactly this dependence to extract concessions from both sides.
- **Textile production** in Gujarat, Bengal and the Coromandel supplied an Indian Ocean market reaching East Africa, Arabia and Southeast Asia, and Bengal muslin already had an international reputation.
- **Cambay and Calicut** were the great western ports, and Calicut under the Zamorin operated with an unusually open regime that welcomed Arab, Chinese and later European traders.
- Indian merchants organised through community networks, the **Gujarati Baniyas and Jains, the Chettiars in the south and the Khattris in the north**, and they operated without state protection or armed force.
- **Currency** in this period was plural, with the Vijayanagara gold varaha or pagoda, the Bahmani and Sultanate silver and billon issues, and cowries in Bengal, and the multiplicity itself sustained a large money-changing profession.
- **Chinese contact** continued into the early part of the century through Zheng He's voyages, which reached Calicut and Bengal before 1433, and their abrupt cessation left the western Indian Ocean open to the Portuguese seventy years later.
- Urbanisation was substantial, and contemporary visitors compared Vijayanagara city, Ahmedabad and Gaur favourably with the largest cities they knew in Europe and West Asia.

The Portuguese Estado da India

Named explicitly in the syllabus and the beginning of European power in Asia. The 2025 paper asked whether Portuguese maritime power disrupted Indian Ocean trade.

- **Vasco da Gama** reached Calicut in May 1498, guided across the Arabian Sea by a pilot, and the voyage established a direct sea route bypassing the Venetian and Mamluk intermediaries.
- **Francisco de Almeida**, first viceroy from 1505, pursued the **blue water policy** of naval supremacy without territorial commitment, and his victory at **Diu in 1509** over a combined Egyptian, Gujarati and Ottoman fleet was decisive.
- **Afonso de Albuquerque**, governor from 1509, reversed that strategy, seizing **Goa in 1510**, Malacca in 1511 and Hormuz in 1515 to control the choke points of the Indian Ocean.
- **Cartaz** passes required Asian shipping to carry Portuguese licences, pay duties and avoid certain commodities, enforced by patrols, and this was a genuinely new imposition of armed control over a previously open sea.
- For the 2025 question, the disruption was real in kind but limited in scale: the Portuguese never carried more than a modest share of total Asian trade, Asian shipping continued and often simply bought cartazes, and the pepper monopoly leaked continuously.
- What genuinely changed was the **principle**, since the Indian Ocean had been a zone of open competitive trade and became one where a state claimed the right to license navigation, a precedent the Dutch and English then inherited and expanded.

- Portuguese weaknesses were structural: a tiny metropolitan population, dependence on a long sea route, corruption in the Estado's administration, and religious policy including the **Goa Inquisition from 1560** that alienated local populations.
- **Estado da India** as a formal structure ran from Goa under a viceroy with jurisdiction from East Africa to Macau, and it was a maritime empire of forts and factories rather than a territorial one, which distinguishes it sharply from what the English later built in Bengal.
- Their durable legacies are the **Cape route itself**, the introduction of American crops including maize, chilli, potato, tobacco, cashew and papaya, and a lasting cultural imprint in Goa.

How the century is examined

Four questions in four years, on the Malwa painting school, Bahmani architecture, Bahlol Lodi and Krishnadevaraya. The pattern is regional specificity.

- Every one of those questions was about a **region rather than about Delhi**, so an answer organised around the Sultanate's decline misses what is being asked.
- Where the question names a **foreign traveller**, use the account for what an insider would not record, meaning markets, prices, everyday practice and court ritual, and note its limitations as an outsider's view.
- For architecture questions, name the **regional school and its distinctive element**, so Jaunpur's propylon screen, Malwa's proportion and marble, Gujarat's carving, Bengal's curved roof, Bijapur's dome.
- For political questions, reach for the **structural explanation**, so Afghan tribal kingship for the Lodis, Deccani versus Afaqi factionalism for the Bahmanis, and nayankara devolution for Vijayanagara.
- Keep **Talikota 1565** and **Panipat 1526** straight, since both close chapters in this unit and candidates routinely confuse their consequences.

Last-mile revision

- Bengal Ilyas Shahi and Husain Shahi; Kashmir Zain-ul-Abidin from 1420; Jaunpur Sharqi propylon; Malwa Mandu; Gujarat Ahmedabad 1411 and Mahmud Begarha 1458-1511.
- Lodis: Bahlol from 1451 as first among equals, Sikandar founded Agra 1504 and the gaz-i-sikandari, Ibrahim overthrown at Panipat 1526.
- Vijayanagara: founded 1336 by Harihara and Bukka; Sangam, Saluva, Tuluva; Krishnadevaraya 1509-29 and the Amuktamalyada; nayankara and ayagar; Talikota 1565.
- Travellers: Nicolo Conti, Abdur Razzaq, Domingo Paes, Fernao Nuniz, Duarte Barbosa.
- Bahmani 1347 at Gulbarga then Bidar; Mahmud Gawan 1466-81 and eight tarafs; Deccani versus Afaqi split; five successor sultanates.
- Portuguese: Gama 1498, Almeida blue water and Diu 1509, Albuquerque takes Goa 1510, Malacca 1511, Hormuz 1515; cartaz system; Goa Inquisition 1560.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating the fifteenth century as a dark interlude between Sultanate and Mughals. It is the period of the richest regional court cultures.
- Saying Bahlol Lodi founded a dynasty in 1448. He took power gradually because Afghan chiefship rested on clan consent, which is the 2026 question.
- Confusing Talikota 1565 with Panipat 1526. One ends Vijayanagara's supremacy, the other the Delhi Sultanate.
- Overstating Portuguese control of Indian Ocean trade. They changed the principle of navigation more than the volume of commerce.
- Using Paes or Razzaq uncritically. They are outsiders writing for foreign audiences and they exaggerate scale.

Mains Practice

Discuss the contributions of the Bahmani Sultans to the development of Indo-Islamic architecture.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

Why did the abdication of power by Alauddin Alam Shah in favour of Bahlol Lodi not culminate in the establishment of the Lodi Dynasty? Elucidate.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

From the Portuguese merchant Domingo Paes' description of Krishnadevaraya's reign, assess the socio-economic and cultural uniqueness of the Vijayanagara Empire.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

Discuss the main features of the Malwa school of painting with examples.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024