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Socio-Economic and Religious Life, 750–1200 CE

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Socio-Economic and Religious Life, 750–1200 CE

Practice: 6 MCQs
From 750 to 1200, no single ruler held all of India. Regional kingdoms rose, and the Cholas of the far south grew the strongest.

This lesson covers the Cholas, the Brihadishvara temple, temples as centres of work and wealth, and the bhakti poet-saints. It ends with the Rajputs and what exams ask.

- **Period:** 750 to 1200, between the Gupta empire and the Delhi Sultanate.
- **Cholas:** ruled from Thanjavur for about four and a half centuries.
- **Temple:** Brihadishvara, built 1003 to 1010 by Rajaraja I.
- **Bhakti:** Alvars (Vishnu) and Nayanars (Shiva) sang in Tamil.
- **Rajputs:** “son of a king”; dynasties rose from the 7th to 11th century.

Contents

1. What changed, 750 to 1200
2. The Cholas
3. Brihadishvara temple
4. Temples and the economy
5. Bhakti in the south
6. Rajputs and PYQs
7. 4 understanding checks
8. Related Articles
9. 6 practice MCQs

1. What changed in India between 750 and 1200?

This was the age between the Gupta empire and the Delhi Sultanate (1206). No single empire ruled the whole land. Instead, many regional kingdoms rose, and their kings leaned on **land**, **temples** and **local power**.

Three big stories run through these centuries. Learn them in this order:

- **The Cholas** built a strong state in the far south.
- **Temples** became rich centres of worship, work and money.
- **Bhakti** poets began a new, personal way of worship in Tamil lands.

1.1 Was this “feudalism”?

Historians argue about this. The word **feudalism** comes from medieval Europe. There, a **fief** was land held in return for service to a lord.

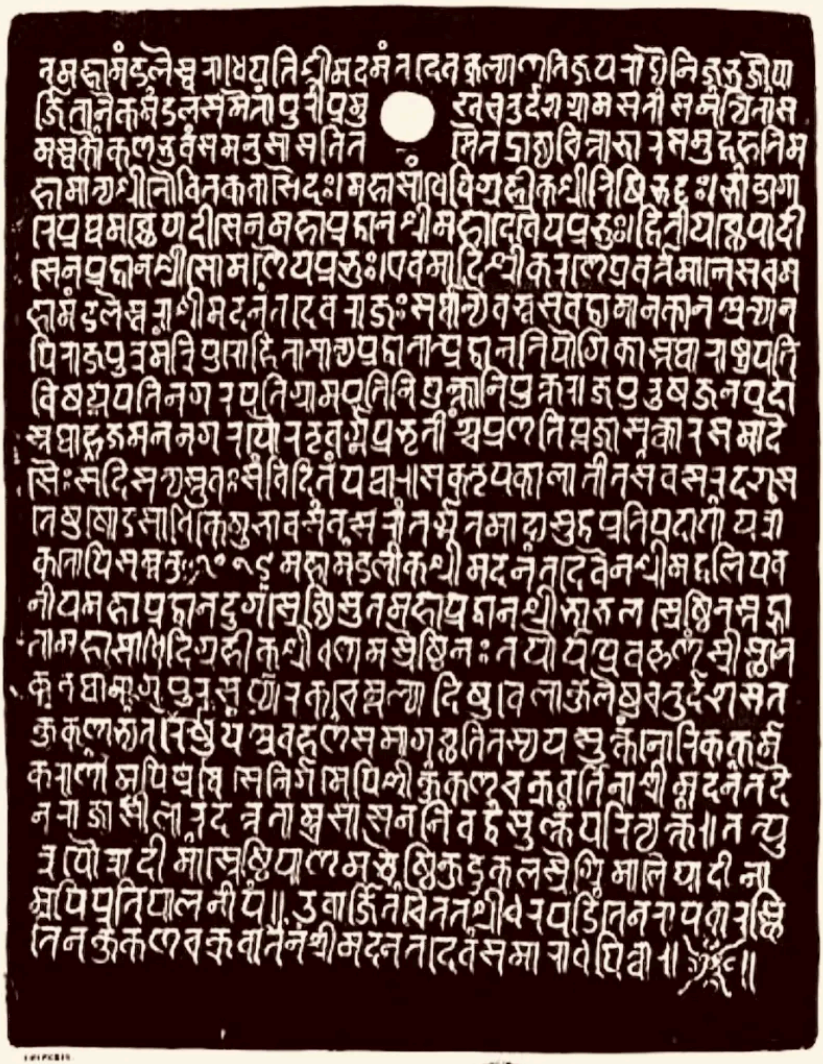
Some scholars see the same pattern in India. They point to kings who gave land to officials and priests. Others warn that the European label may not fit. Later historians who hunted for feudal institutions outside Europe sometimes ended up with misunderstanding.

So treat it as a **debate**, not a settled fact. For exams, know both views and say that the question is still open.

1.2 Try it: why can two historians disagree?

Think of a land-grant record. It tells you what land was handed over. It does not tell you what happened to the economy afterwards. So each historian must guess the wider effect from other clues.

One school stresses fading towns and coins. Another stresses new land brought under the plough. Both use real evidence, so the debate stays alive.





A Shilahara dynasty copper-plate land grant, Saka year 1016 (1094 CE), Maharashtra, in Devanagari Sanskrit. Via Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Sources:

- Chola dynasty (Britannica)
- Rajput (Britannica)
- Feudalism (Britannica)

True or false: Historians all agree that India had the same feudalism as medieval Europe.

2. How did the Cholas run their state?

The Cholas ruled from **Thanjavur** in Tamil Nadu. Their rule lasted about **four and a half centuries**, from the 9th century. Under them, **revenue administration, village self-government and irrigation** were highly organised.

Learn the early kings in order:

- **Vijayalaya** (about 850 to 870) founded the line.
- **Parantaka I** (907 to about 955) widened the kingdom.
- **Rajaraja I** (985 to 1014) made it an empire.
- **Rajendra I** (1014 to 1044) pushed it north.

2.1 What did Rajaraja I change?

Rajaraja I took the title **mummudi Chola**. He attacked the Chera port of Kandalur. He also invaded Lanka and sacked **Anuradhapura**. By 1014 he held Lakshadweep and the Maldives.

At home, he replaced hereditary princes with **appointed governors**. He split the empire into units called **valanadus**. These were based on a land assessment survey. He also had many inscriptions cut to record

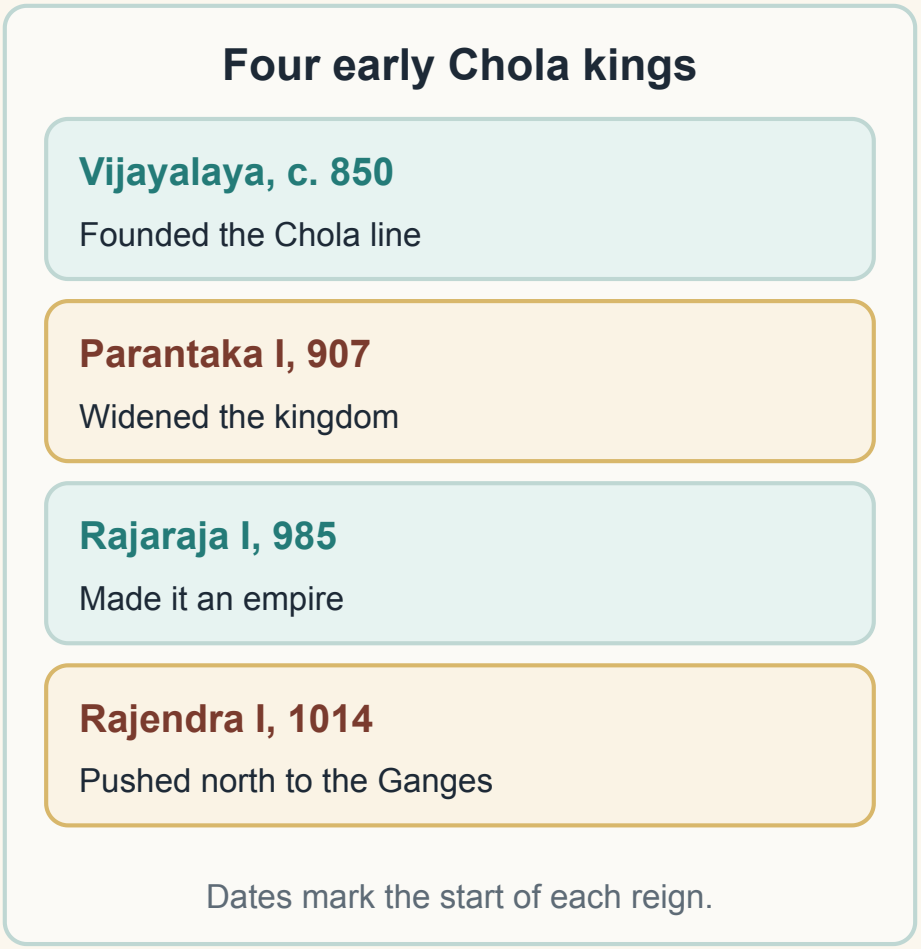
temple grants.

His elder sister **Kundavai** helped him. Note that sources differ on his last year: 1012 or 1014.

2.2 What did Rajendra I add?

Rajendra I sent an expedition to the **Ganges** in 1023. He founded a new capital, **Gangaikondacholapuram**. The name means “city of the Chola who took the Ganges”.

The Cholas then faded. The Pandyas conquered them in 1257, and the dynasty ended in 1279.



Early Chola kings, in order. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Chola dynasty (Britannica) (section 2)
- Great Living Chola Temples (UNESCO World Heritage Centre)
- Rajaraja I (Britannica)

True or false: Rajaraja I split the Chola empire into units called valanadus.

3. How was the Brihadishvara temple built?

The **Brihadishvara temple** at Thanjavur is the best-known Chola monument. Rajaraja I built it between **1003 and 1010**. Its local name is **Thanjai Periya Kovil**. Its first name was **Rajarajeswaram**.

Remember the year **1010** for the finish. That is when the gold-plated finial (the **kalasam**) was set on top. Work began about 1003-1004, and Rajaraja consecrated the temple in 1009-1010.

3.1 What makes it a wonder of building?

- **Granite, no mortar.** The stones lock together without mud or lime.
- **Huge scale.** It used about forty times the stone of an average Chola temple.
- **A tall tower.** The **vimana** is roughly 60 metres high. Sources differ by a metre or two.
- **A crowning stone.** The top block is one rock of about 80 tons.
- **A big Nandi.** The bull statue weighs about 25 tons.

The tower stands for **Mount Meru**, the mythic mountain. Inscriptions call the temple **Dakshina Meru**, the southern Meru.

3.2 Is it a World Heritage Site?

Yes. It became a World Heritage Site in **1987**. In **2004** the site grew to include two more temples. They are **Gangaikondacholisvaram** (Rajendra I, 1035) and **Airavatesvara** at Darasuram (Rajaraja II, 12th century).

Together they are the **Great Living Chola Temples**. “Living” means worship still goes on there.

Sources:

- Brihadishvara temple (Britannica)

- Great Living Chola Temples (UNESCO World Heritage Centre) (section 3)

Think it through: why is the Brihadishvara temple called a feat of building?

Its granite stones lock together without mortar. Builders used far more stone than for a usual Chola temple. The tower reaches roughly 60 metres.

4. What did temples do besides worship?

In this age a big temple was also an **economic centre**. It owned land. It paid workers. It held gold, silver and gems. It acted like a bank and a treasury in one.

The Brihadishvara temple shows this well. The royal family and vassals gave thousands of kilograms of gold, silver and gems. Rajaraja alone gave more than **38,000 gold coins**.

- **Employer:** the temple supported many priests, musicians and workers.
- **Landholder:** kings gave land for its upkeep.
- **Treasury:** its stored wealth stayed safe inside the walls.

4.1 How did the temple shape art and daily life?

The walls carry wide **mural paintings**. Carvers cut 81 of the 108 dance poses called **karanas**. At Airavatesvara, a frieze shows the 63 **Nayanmars**, the Shiva poet-saints.

Rajaraja also had the saints' hymns sung in the great temple at Thanjavur. So art, music and faith joined in one place.

Sources:

- Brihadishvara temple (Britannica) (section 4)

- Rajaraja I (Britannica) (section 4)
- Great Living Chola Temples (UNESCO World Heritage Centre) (section 4)
- Nayanar (Britannica)

True or false: In Chola times a big temple was also a centre of money and work.

5. How did bhakti begin in the south?

Bhakti means loving devotion to a personal god. It arose in South India between the **7th and 10th centuries**. Its poets sang in **Tamil**. The **Alvars** praised Vishnu. The **Nayanars** praised Shiva.

Many, but not all, bhakti movements were open to both genders and all castes. That was a big break from rigid ritual.

5.1 Who were the Alvars?

The Alvars lived from the 7th to the 10th century. They went from temple to temple, singing joyful hymns to Vishnu. The name means “one who is immersed” in meditation.

In the 10th century, **Nathamuni** gathered their songs. The book is the **Nalayira Prabandham**, the “Collection of 4,000 Songs”. **Nammalvar** is one famous Alvar.

5.2 Who were the Nayanars?

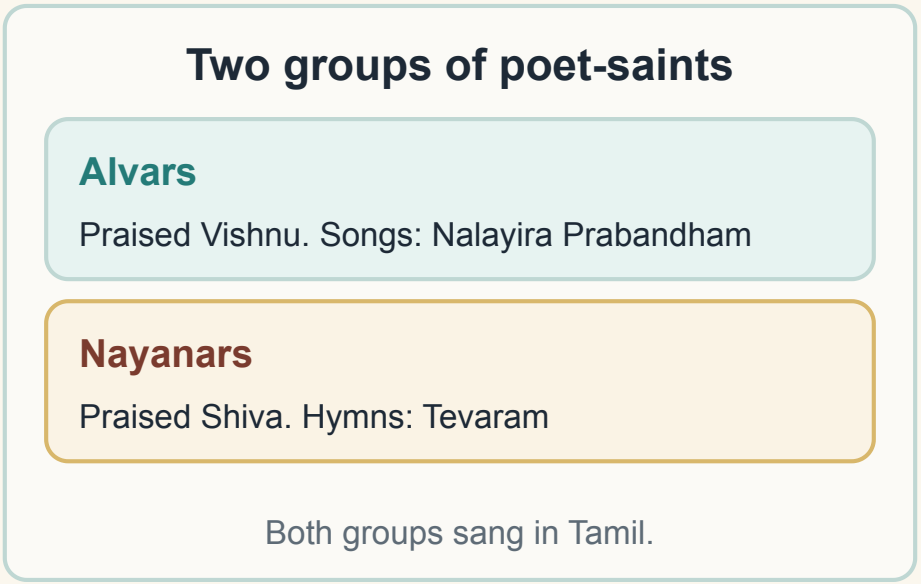
The Nayanars were Tamil poet-musicians of the 7th and 8th centuries. Three stand out: **Appar**, **Sambandar** (Nanachampantar) and **Sundarar** (Chuntaramurtti).

Nambi Andar Nambi collected their hymns as the **Tevaram** in the 10th century. The poet **Manikkavachakar** and his **Tiruvachakam** are probably slightly later.

Sources differ on how many saints belong to the list. Tradition counts **63** Nayanars.

5.3 How did bhakti spread north?

Bhakti moved to North India too. The **Bhagavata Purana** of the 10th century carried it most famously. Later, **Kabir** (1440 to 1518) taught a bhakti of his own.



The two Tamil bhakti groups. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Bhakti (Britannica)
- Alvar (Britannica)
- Nayanar (Britannica) (section 5)

True or false: Bhakti first arose in North India.
Think it through: which poet-saints praised Shiva, and which praised Vishnu?

The Nayanars praised Shiva. The Alvars praised Vishnu. Both groups sang in Tamil.

6. Who were the Rajputs, and what do exams ask?

Rajput means “son of a king”. Several Rajput dynasties rose between the 7th and 11th centuries. By the 11th century the **Chauhans** were the main power in the east.

Claims to Rajput rank were often made by groups that had won power. These included invaders from Central Asia and local tribal peoples. So **rank followed power**, not only birth.

Tradition sorts Rajputs into three descents: **Suryavanshi** (sun), **Chandravanshi** (moon) and **Agnikula** (fire).

6.1 What do the PYQs keep testing?

The same ideas return. Open each paper to see the real question.

- **Nayanars and Alvars:** CDS II 2019, Q58 and Q111. Know that they were Shiva and Vishnu poet-saints. Place them from the 7th century, up to the 10th (sources differ on the end).
- **A bhakti trap:** CAPF ACs 2020, Q75. Karaikkal Ammaiyar was a Shiva devotee among the Nayanars, not an Alvar. **Andal** was the woman Alvar.

Now practise the ideas below.

Sources:

- Rajput (Britannica) (section 6)

Your understanding checks

Your 4 quick checks Answered 0 of 4 · Correct 0

This score resets when the page reloads.

Practice: 6 MCQs

Practice MCQs

1. The Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur was built under Rajaraja I during which period?

A. 1257 to 1279

B. 1003 to 1010

C. 850 to 870

D. 1023 to 1035

See answer ↓

2. The Alvars of the Tamil country sang hymns in praise of which god?

A. Shiva

B. Indra

C. Vishnu

D. Brahma

See answer ↓

3. Which Chola king founded the new capital Gangaikondacholapuram after his expedition to the Ganges?

A. Rajendra I

B. Rajaraja I

C. Vijayalaya

D. Parantaka I

See answer ↓

4. In 2004 UNESCO extended the Brihadishvara temple listing to include which two other Chola temples?

A. Konark and Khajuraho

B. Virupaksha and Vitthala

C. Gangaikondacholisvaram and Airavatesvara

D. Meenakshi and Ramanathaswamy

See answer ↓

5. The Alvar and Nayanar poet-saints composed their bhakti poems mainly in which language?

A. Telugu

B. Prakrit

C. Sanskrit

D. Tamil

See answer ↓

6. Under the Cholas, from which city did the monarchy rule for about four and a half centuries from the 9th century CE?

A. Thanjavur

B. Hampi

C. Kanchipuram

D. Madurai

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The answer is **1003 to 1010**. Work began about 1003-1004. The gold-plated finial was set on top about 1010. Why the others fail: 850 to 870 is the time of Vijayalaya, who founded the line. 1023 to 1035 belongs to Rajendra I. 1257 to 1279 is the end of the Chola dynasty. Memory hook: Rajaraja started the temple in 1003 and finished it by 1010. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The answer is **Vishnu**. The Alvars wandered from temple to temple. They sang joyful hymns in his praise. Why the others fail: Shiva was praised by the Nayanars, the other group of poet-saints. Brahma and Indra were not the focus of this movement. Memory hook: Alvars and Vishnu, Nayanars and Shiva. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is **Rajendra I**. He sent the expedition in 1023. The name of the city means 'city of the Chola who took the Ganges'. Why the others fail: Rajaraja I built the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur. Vijayalaya founded the line. Parantaka I widened the kingdom before Rajaraja. Memory hook: son Rajendra went north to the Ganges. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** The answer is **Gangaikondacholisvaram and Airavatesvara**. Together the three are the Great Living Chola Temples. The first listing was in 1987. Why the others fail: Meenakshi and Ramanathaswamy are Pandya-land temples and not in this group. Konark and Khajuraho are in other regions. Virupaksha and Vitthala are Vijayanagara temples at Hampi. Memory hook: three Chola temples, listed in 1987 and 2004. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The answer is **Tamil**. Their poems praised Vishnu and Shiva. Bhakti began in the south in the 7th to 10th centuries. Why the others fail: Sanskrit was the language of the Vedic and priestly tradition. Telugu and Prakrit were not the language of this movement. Memory hook: southern bhakti was sung in Tamil. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** The answer is **Thanjavur**. The great Cholas set up their monarchy there in the 9th century. Why the others fail: Madurai was the Pandya capital. Kanchipuram was a Pallava city. Hampi was the Vijayanagara capital, much later. Memory hook: Cholas and Thanjavur go together. ↑ Q6

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