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INDIA BETWEEN AD 750–1200

The period between AD 750 and AD 1200 is referred to as an early medieval period of Indian History. It was earlier treated by historians as a ‘dark phase’. It was so because during this time the whole country was divided into numerous regional states which were busy fighting with each other. But recent studies have indicated that, though politically divided, India witnessed a growth of new and rich cultural activities in the fields of art, literature and language. In fact, some best specimens of temple architecture and Indian literature belong to this period. Thus, far from being ‘dark’ it may be treated as a bright and vibrant phase of Indian history.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- identify the various regional kingdoms which emerged during AD 750 and AD 1200;
- examine the nature of state;
- highlight the social and economic changes;
- evaluate the cultural activities;
- and assess the significance of India’s contact with Southeast Asia during 8th and 12th centuries;

8.1 POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

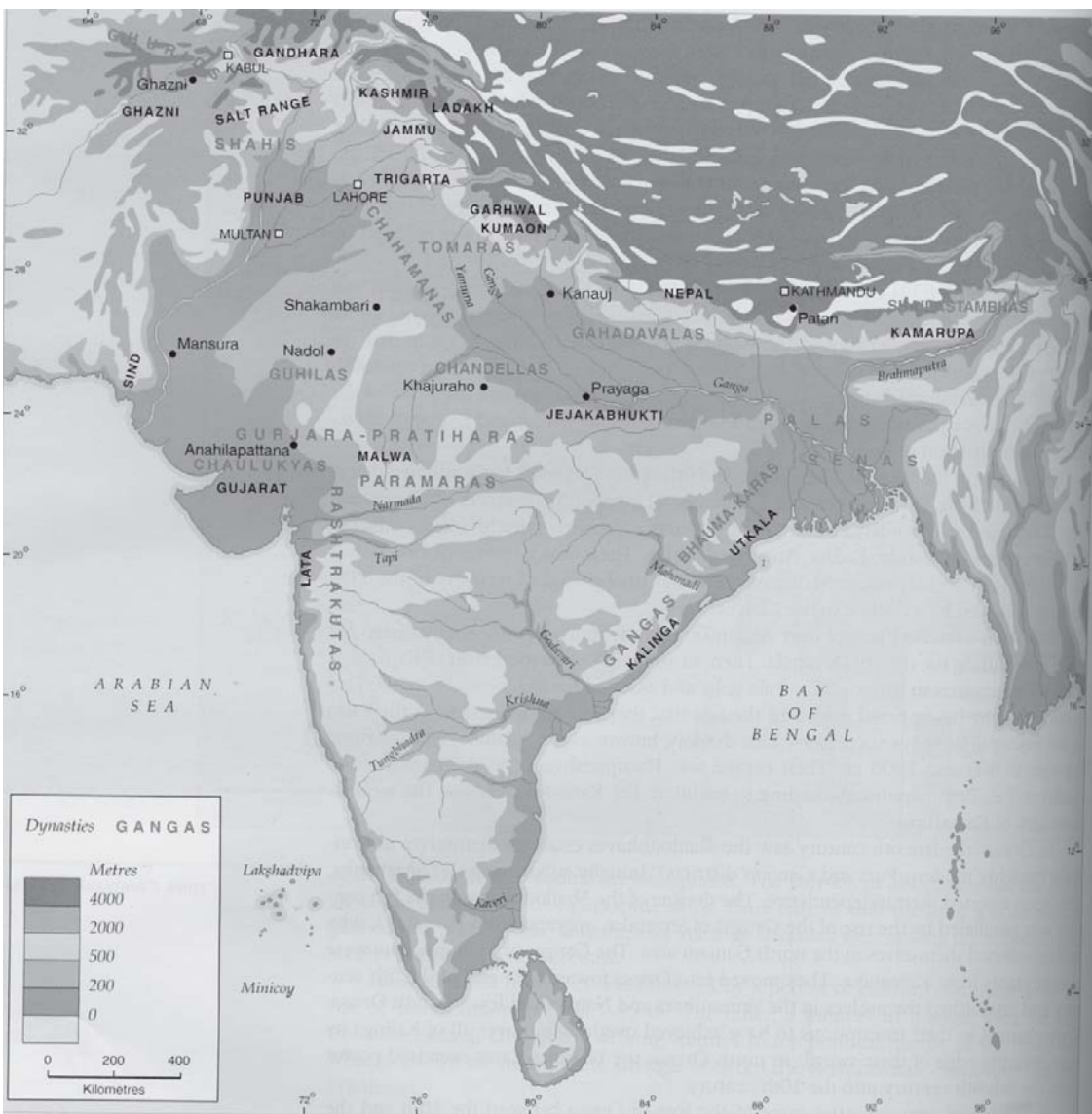
The political developments after Harshavardhan, about whom you have read in the last chapter, can be best understood if we divide the period from AD 750 to AD 1200 in two parts (a) AD 750–AD 1000; (b) AD 1000–AD 1200. The first phase was marked by the growth of three important political powers in India. These were Gurjara Pratiharas in north India, Palas in eastern India and Rashtrakutas in South India. These powers were constantly fighting with each other with a aim to set up their control on Gangetic region in northern India. This armed conflict among these three powers is known as ‘Tripartite struggle’. In the second phase we notice the break up of these powers. It resulted in the rise of many smaller kingdoms all over the country. For example, in northern India, the disintegration of the Pratihara empire brought to the forefront various Rajput states under the control of different Rajput dynasties such as the Chahmanas (Chauhans), Chandellas, Paramaras. etc. These were the



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states which fought and resisted the Turkish attacks from northwest India led by Mahmud Ghaznavi and Mohammad Ghori in the 11th and 12th centuries, but had to yield ultimately as they failed to stand unitedly against the invaders.

Let us now trace briefly the history of the three powers we have mentioned above. The Gurjara Pratihara dynasty was founded by Nagabhata I in the region of Malwa in the eighth century. He belonged to a Rajput clan. Later one of his successors, Vatsaraja extended his rule over to a large part of North India and made Kannauj in western Uttara Pradesh his capital. Vatsaraja’s policy of expansion brought him in conflict with Dharamapala, the Pala King of Bengal and Bihar. Soon, the Rashtrakuta king Dhruva from south India jumped into the fight. And thus began what is known as ‘Tripartite Struggle’ i.e struggle among three powers. It continued for about the next hundred and fifty years under various succeeding kings with ups and downs. The Gurjara-Pratiharas, however, could continue to maintain their hold over Kannauj till the last. One of the important kings of this dynasty was Mihira Bhoja (ninth century).



Map 8.1 Political Map of India (750–1000 AD)



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He was highly praised by an Arabian scholar Sulaiman for keeping his empire safe from robbers.

In eastern India, Pala dynasty was founded by Gopala (8th century). As the names of all the succeeding kings ended with 'Pala' this dynasty came to be known as the 'Pala' dynasty. The son and grandson of Gopala, viz; Dharmapala and Devapala greatly extended the power and prestige of the Pala dynasty. Though their expansion towards west was checked by the Pratiharas, the Palas continued to rule over Bihar and Bengal for nearly four centuries with a small break. The Pala kings were the followers of Buddhism. They greatly promoted this religion by making monasteries (*viharas*) and temples in eastern India. Dharmapala is known to have founded the famous Vikramashila university near Bhagalpur in Bihar. Like Nalanda university, it attracted students from all parts of India and also from Tibet. Many Sanskrit texts were translated into Tibetan at this monastery. The most celebrated name associated with Vikramashila University was that of Atisha Dipankara who was greatly respected in Tibet.

In south, Dantidurga was the founder of the dynasty called, Rashtrakuta dynasty (8th AD). The capital of the Rastrakutas was Manyakheta or Malkhed near Sholapur. It was under the king Dhruva that the Rashtrakutas turned towards north India in a bid to control Kannauj, then the imperial city. And as mentioned above, it led to the beginning of 'Tripartite struggle'. One of the important kings of the Rashtrakuta dynasty was Krishna I. He built the famous Kailasha temple at Ellora (near Aurangabad, Maharashtra). It is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is monolithic i.e. made of one single piece of rock. The Arab accounts inform us that the Rashtrakutas were quite friendly with the Arab traders who visited their empire. These traders were allowed to build mosques and follow their religion without any hindrance. It testifies to the liberal attitude of the Rashtrakuta kings and also to their desire to draw economic benefit from the growing sea trade conducted by the Arabs at that time.

In South India, the Chola Kings founded a mighty empire during AD 1000–AD 1200. The relationship between these Cholas, called the "Imperial Cholas" with the earlier Cholas mentioned in the Sangam literature is not clear. The Cholas came to power after overthrowing the authority of the Pallavas in South India. The founder of the Chola dynasty was Vijayalaya (9th century AD) but the real architects of the glory of the dynasty were Rajaraja I (AD 985–AD 1014) and his son Rajendra I (AD 1014–AD 1044). During the heyday of the Chola empire, it extended from R.Tungabhadra (a tributary of R.Krishna) in north to Kanya Kumari in south. The Chola Kings made a successful use of their navy and conquered not only Maldives and Lakshadweep Islands but also Sri Lanka. They also defeated the kings of Malaya and Java and Sumatra. One of the greatest contributions of Rajaraja I was the construction of the famous temple known as Rajarajeshwara or Brihadesvara temple, dedicated to Shiva at Tanjore. He also ordered a survey of land for better collection of land revenue in his empire. The rule of his son, Rajendra I was even more dazzling. He carried his arms up to Ganga in Bengal after defeating the Pala King, Mahipala. To commemorate this victory he founded a new capital called 'Gangaikondacholapuram' and acquired for himself the title "Gangai-konda" (conqueror of Ganga). He was a great patron of learning and was known as Pandita-chola. The last important Chola king was Kullotunga (AD 1070–1122 AD). Under him the Chola empire started disintegrating and shrunk to much smaller area.

The above account will make you understand that though there were frequent inter regional clashes, cultural growth was also taking place side by side. In fact, the emer-



gence of big political powers brought about a relative stability in different regions. It led to the developments of distinct cultural patterns related to art, architecture and literature within each of these regions. We shall discuss these patterns slightly later in this lesson.

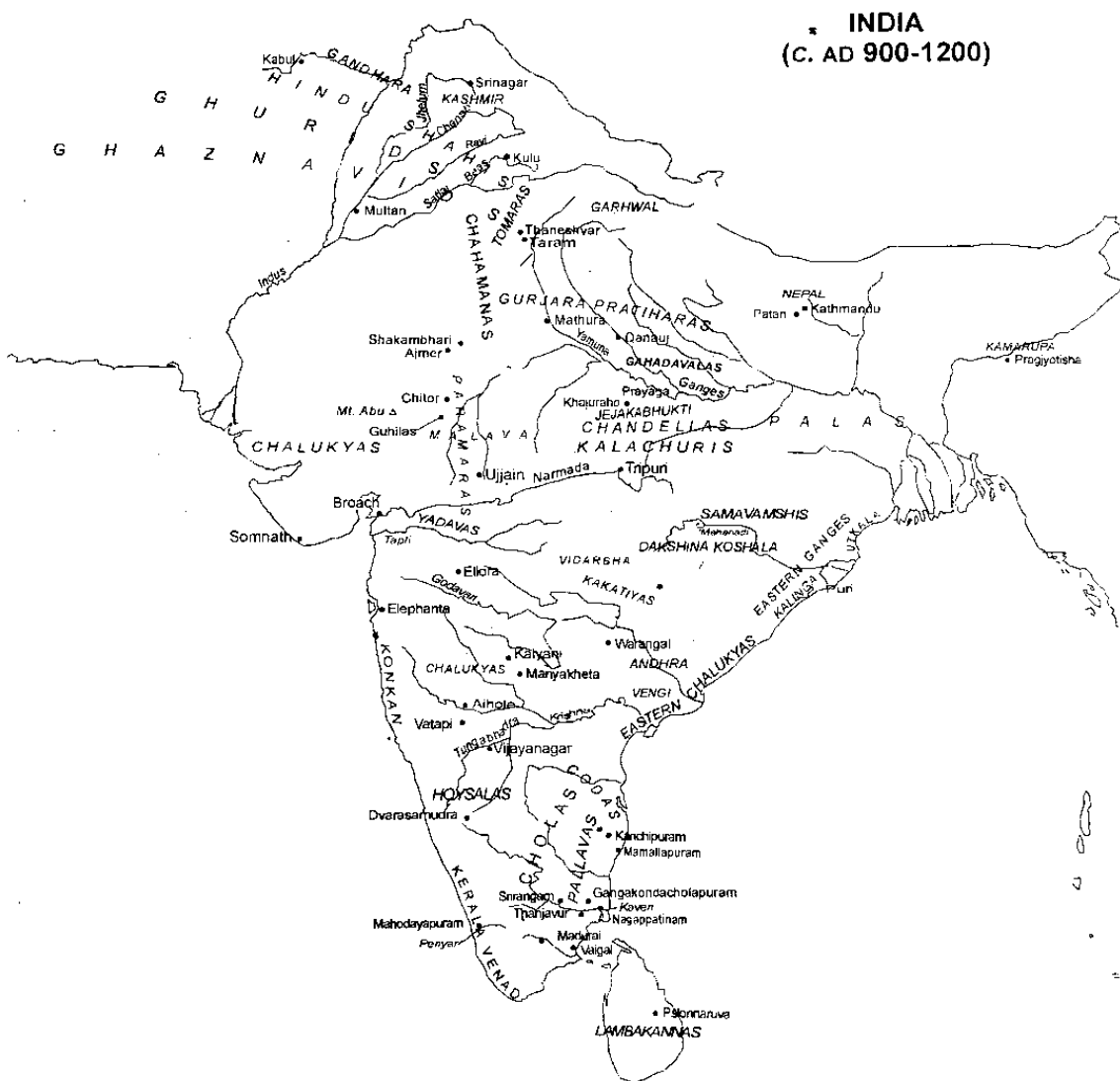


INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.1

1. Name the three dynasties which participated in the Tripartite Struggle'. Give the names of at least one ruler of each of these dynasties?

2. What was the cause of conflict between the three powers during AD 750–1000?

3. Who was the Pratihara ruler who received praise from the Arab scholar?



Map 8.2 Political Map of India (1000 to 1200 AD)



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4. Who founded the Vikramashila University?

5. Which religion was patronized and promoted by the Pala Kings?

6. Which Chola king acquired the title 'Gangaikonda' and why ?

8.2 NATURE OF STATE

The state structure in this period has often been described as “decentralized” political system. What is ‘decentralized’ polity? It is a system in which there is of course a king as the main authority at the top, but he shares his rule with other small chiefs called feudatories or the *samantas*. You may wonder who these *samantas* were. Well the term ‘*Samanta*’ basically refers to a king who has been defeated but his kingdom has been restored to him but with the condition that he will continue to accept the over lordship of the conquering king and also pay regular tribute to him in cash or kind. He may also be asked to help with military assistance in times of need. As these chiefs enjoyed freedom of administration over their regions they were quite powerful. Surely you can guess that these chiefs could always be a threat to the overlord, and no wonder whenever there was a weak king at the top, they would assert their independence leading to the break up of the empire. And precisely it was what happened during the last days of Pratihara empire as mentioned above.

Another aspect the decentralized polity was characterized by the practice of making land grants to Brahmanas and others. This practice was initiated by the Satavahanas kings in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, but after the Gupta period it had become a normal practice all over the country. Now land grants came to made not only to religious persons and institutions but to state officials as well. Why did it so happen? It is suggested that one of the reasons for the increase in land grants during this period, was the decline in trade and, therefore the shortage of coined money to pay to the officials and others for their services. The shortage of coined money in the post-Gupta period is indicated by the absence of the presence of coins in the archeological finds. The land granted to the donee (the receiver of grant) was tax free, i.e., the donee did not pay any tax to the state and used the produce and income on it for his personal benefit. The donee was also free from any interference by his king or his officials in managing the land donated to him. Thus , these donees converted the lands granted to them into independent islands of authority with no or little central control.

In the Chola kingdom in South India, the structure of administration was slightly different. Here at the village level, a great amount of autonomy was enjoyed by the local people. They looked after their administration with the help of self elected local bodies. Two types of village assemblies are mentioned in the records. These were known as Sabha and Ur. Sabha was the assembly in the villages which were inhabited predominantly by the brahmanas, whereas Ur was in the non brahmanical settlements. These assemblies looked after the local public works, tax collection, temple management etc., with the help of the members elected through a procedure set by the villagers. It was a unique feature of the Chola administration as it represented a harmonious balance between the central authority and the local self-government.



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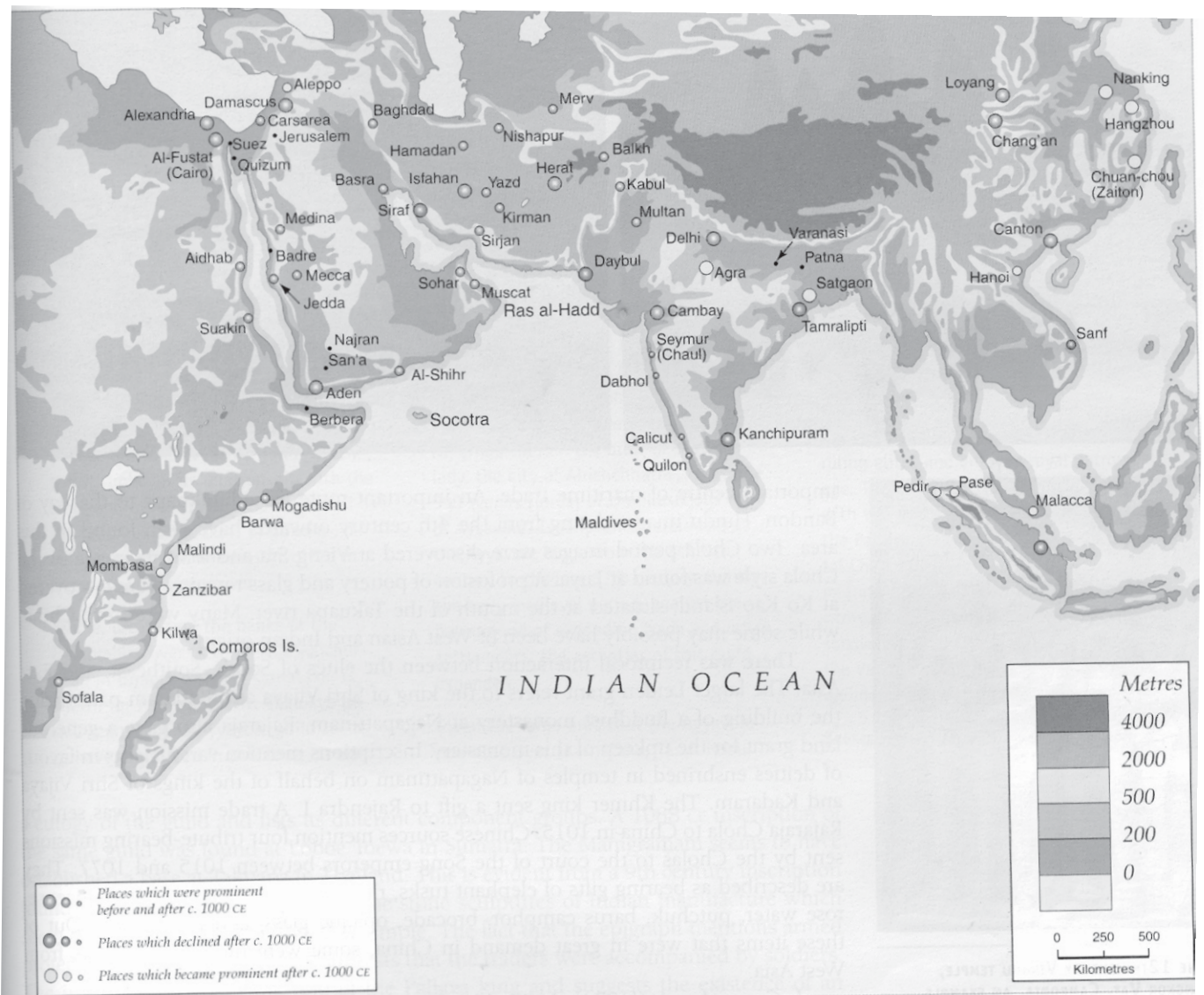


INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.2

1. What do you understand by a decentralized political system? How was it harmful for the polity of North India during the early medieval period?
2. Which of the kingdom gave importance to village assemblies? What were the village assemblies called?

8.3 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

The early medieval period was also marked by many social and economic changes. Socially, an important phenomenon of this period was the proliferation or increase in



Map 8.3 Map of South East Asia



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the number of castes. How did it happen? One of the reason for it was the inclusion of newer groups into brahmanical society. It is suggested that as the number of land grants increased, new areas were brought under cultivation. It made local tribal people leave hunting as their main profession and take up agriculture. They were then transformed into peasants, and assimilated in society as sudras. The land grants in fact resulted in movement and migration of Brahmanas to different internal areas where they were able to introduce and enforce their brahmanical social values. The land grants also led to the increase in the number of Kayastha class. The Kayasthas were basically scribes and they specialized in drafting and writing land grant documents. Naturally, with increase in the number of land grants their importance also increased .

But the most important feature of this period was the rise of a new class of people called the Rajputs, such as Chahmanas, Paramaras, Pratiharas, Chandellas etc. Some historians believe that they were the descendants of various groups of foreign invaders such as Sakas, Kushanas, Hunas etc, who had been coming to India from northwest during different times of history. These people gradually settled down in the region of Rajasthan and, after intermingling with the Indian society, emerged as a warrior class. There are others who treat them as a part of the Kshatriya varna of the brahmanical system. But today many scholars see a connection between the rise of Rajput class and the extension of agriculture activities in Rajasthan. It is pointed out that with the spread of land grants there was an increase in the number of agriculture settlements. As a result, many local chiefs came to acquire enough financial and political power to set up an independent authority. In order to acquire legitimacy and authenticity to their newly acquired position in the eyes of their subjects, they invited brahmanas from Gangetic and other regions to perform for them royal rituals and ceremonies, and in return gave them land and other things as fee, i.e. dakshina. They also made brahmanas write about their illustrious ancestry linking them with lord Rama (of the solar race) and lord Krishna (of the lunar race) to claim a dignified position of a warrior class.

Economically, the first phase, i.e. AD 750–AD 1000, is believed to be one of decline. It is evident from the absence of coins for exchange and the decayed condition of towns in northern India. But in the second phase after AD 1000, we notice a revival of trade activities. Not only do we come across new gold coins, there are also numerous references to trade goods and towns. What could be the reason for it? There seem to be two main reasons for it. One, there was increase in agricultural activities on account of land grants in fresh areas. It led to surplus production of goods for exchange. And second, the Arab traders had emerged on the coastal areas of India as important players in international sea trade. The Arabs had acquired a foothold in Sind in AD 712 and later, gradually, they set up their settlements all along the sea from Arabia to China. These settlements served as important channels for the sale and purchase of Indian goods, and thus helped in the growth of Indian external trade. In south India, the Chola kings maintained close commercial contact with southeast Asia (Malaya, Indonesia etc) and China.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.3

1. What was the main factor for the growth of Rajput class.



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8.4 CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

The new regional kingdoms led to the emergence of new regional cultural zones such as Bengal and Orissa in the North Gujarat and Maharashtra in Central India as well as Andhra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu in the South. The various art forms, languages, literature, etc. that form an important part of our regional cultures today, took their shape around this period. Most of the languages such as Bengali, Assamese Oriya, Marathi, etc. that are spoken in the northern, central and eastern parts of India are some examples. The rich literature produced in these languages began to replace the earlier monopoly of Sanskrit literature. The literary works in the regional languages were often composed under the patronage of the new regional rulers. A famous work composed in the regional language around this time under the Cholas was the Tamil version of the *Ramayana*, composed by Kamban. Similarly in Karnataka, Pampa who is regarded as one of the jewels of Kanada literature composed *Vikramarjuna-vijaya*, known popularly as *Pampa Bharat*, in Kannada. In Andhra region, Nanniah translated some portions of Mahabharata in Telugu. It was later completed by poet Tikkanna in the thirteenth century.

However, Sanskrit still retained a position of importance among the elites as a language of learning. Important works composed in Sanskrit around this period were the *kathasaritasagara* a collection of stories, the *Rajtarangini*, a vivid account of the kings of Kashmir composed by Kalhana and the *Gita Govinda*, a piece of devotional literature



Fig 8.1 Nataraja



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composed on the theme of love between Radha and Krishna, by Jayadeva in Bengal under the Pala kings.

Another activity that received royal patronage was that of temple –building. The temples served as representative of the might and glory of the kings who had them built. The loftier the temple, the greater was the might reflected. Indeed there was a definite correlation. The construction of large temples and their regular maintenance required the mobilization of huge amount of resources, both financial and human. This could be possible only when the particular king was wealthy & powerful enough.

The three types of temple architecture which evolved during the period are known as the Nagara, Dravida and Vesara (mixed) styles during this period. The characteristic feature of the Nagara style of temples was the lofty tower or spire called the *Shikhara*. Temples built in this style were spread over large parts of northern India, particularly in Central India, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Orissa. However, even within the general Nagara style, there were distinctive regional characteristics. Some of the outstanding examples of this style, are the Lingaraja temple at Bhuvaneshwar, the Sun temple at Konark and the Kandariya Mahadeva temple, built by the Chandella kings at Khajuraho. The Dravida style of architecture is found in South India. It reached the height of its glory under the rule of the Chola kings. Some of the important characteristics of this style are the *garbhagriha*, the *vimanas*, the *mandapa* and the *gopurams*. The *garbhagriha* was the inner sanctum that housed the chief-deity to whom the temple was dedicated. The *vimanas* were the various storeys built atop the *garbhagriha*. The *mandapa* was a hall with numerous carved pillars, placed before the *garbhagriha*. The *gopurams* were the lofty gates along the high walls that enclosed the entire temple complex. An important example of this style is the Brihadishvara temple built by Chola king Rajaraja at Tanjore. The Vesara temples represented a mixed style. These were mostly built under the patronage of the Chalukyas and are found at Pattadakal near Badami (Karnataka). There was also great improvement in the art of making sculptures in this period. An important contribution of Chola artists in this respect was the bronze images of Nataraja. These images represent Siva in his cosmic dance and are unmatched in their rhythm and balance.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.4

1. What was the style of architecture followed in Northern India?

2. What is the most important contribution of Cholas to the art of Sculpture.

8.5 CONTACT WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indians were never such people to stay at home. They have been moving out from ancient time to different parts of the world for trade and other activities. As far as the Indian contact with Southeast Asia is concerned, it appears to be as old as fifth century B.C. Jatakas the Buddhist texts belonging to this period refer to Indians visiting Suvarnadvipa (island of gold), which is identified with Java. Such early contacts with Southeast Asia are confirmed by the recent archeological finds of pearls and ornaments of agate and carnelian, the semi-precious stones of Indian origin, from the coastal sites in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, etc. These finds belong to as far back as first

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century BC. According to the Chinese traditions, the first kingdom in South east Asia was founded at Funan (Cambodia) in the fourth century AD by a brahman known as Kaundinya who had come from India and had married the local princess. However, Indian and South-east Asian contacts became closer from 5th century AD onwards when inscriptions in Sanskrit language start appearing in many areas. It reached its peak during AD 800–AD 1300 when many kings and dynasties with Indian names emerge all over Southeast Asia.

The Southeast contact was largely on account of trade. Southeast Asia is rich in cardamom, sandal wood, camphor, cloves etc. which formed important items of trade between India and the West. Initially, the Indian traders appear to have settled along the coast, but gradually they shifted their network to the interior. Along with the traders came the priests particularly the Buddhist and brahmanas, to meet the ritual requirements of the Indian settlers. It thus created a situation for the spread of Indian social and cultural ideas in South east Asia. But it must be noted that Indian contact did not uproot the local culture. It was rather a case of peaceful intermixing of Indian concepts with local cultural features. Therefore, for example, while Sanskrit was accepted as a language of court and religion in Southeast Asia the regional languages continued to be used side by side, and we find many inscriptions in mixed Sanskrit and local language. Similarly, the concept of varna was known to the south east Asians and brahmanas were respected in society, but social divisions were not rigid as it was in India.

The most important empire which come to be founded in South east Asia in the 8th Century AD was the Shailendra empire. It comprised Java, Sumatra, Malay-Penninsula and other parts of the Southeast Asian region. They were a leading naval power and on account of their geographical position controlled the trade between China and India as well as other countries in the west. The Shailendra kings were followers of Buddhism and had close contact with the Indian rulers. One of the kings of this empire, built a monastery at Nalanda in the ninth century, and at his request the Pala king Devapala of Bengal granted five villages for its upkeep. Similarly in the eleventh century another king was permitted by the Chola king Rajaraja I to build a Buddhist monastery at Nagapattam on the Tamil Coast. The Shailendras also built a beautiful temple dedicated to Buddha at Barabudur in Java. It is situated on the top of a hillock and consists of nine gradually receding terraces.

Besides Buddhism, the worship of Hindu gods such as Vishnu and Siva was also quite popular in southeast Asia. The temples dedicated to them have been found at various places. They show distinct traces of Indian influence and inspiration. One of the most famous temples, dedicated to Vishnu, is Angkorvat temple built in the 12th century by Surya Varman II, the king of Kambuja (Cambodia). It is surrounded by a moat, filled with water. It has a huge gopuram (gateway) and number of galleries, the walls of which are decorated with sculptures based on themes drawn from Mahabharat and Ramayana.

**INTEXT QUESTION 8.5**

1. Which kingdom in South east Asia had close relations with India during 9th–11th century AD?

2. Mention the two important temples in South east Asia? Whom were they dedicated to?



Notes



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

The period between AD 750–AD 1200 is no more treated as a ‘dark phase’ of Indian history. It was marked by various political, social and cultural activities. Politically, the period between AD 750–AD 1200 is early Medieval period with the rise of numerous regional states. In North India Gurjara- Pratiharas, Palas in east & Rashtrakutes in South India rose to power in early years (750–1000) while in later years (1000–1200) Rajput states in North & Cholas in South fetched power from previous rulers.

The nature of state is a decentralized political system wherein the king at the top is assisted by small chiefs or *Samanthas*. Land grants become very common to religious people & to state officials in lieu of salary. Sabha (Brahman predominant village), Ur (non brahminical settlements) were local administering authorities in South India.

It is a period of economic decline due to diminishing overseas trade. During this period several tribes gave up hunting, start tilling lands, and subsequently included into brah- manical society.

This period is of robust cultural development. Regional languages & Regional literature developed around this time. Nagara, Dravida & Vesara style of temple architecture evolved during this period. Cultural contacts with South east Asia (Java, Sematra, Malay, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia), though developed on settling of Indian traders on these regions.



TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Name the dynasty that rose to great heights in the history of south India between the 10th and 12th centuries. List some of the important achievements of the rulers of this dynasty.
2. Name any three dynasties which were involved in the Tripartite Struggle.
3. Why did the Rajputs need to seek ways of legitimizing their royal authority in the eyes of the subject population?
4. Trace the process that led to the ‘*samantas*’ becoming an integral feature of the political structures of kingdoms in the early medieval period.
5. Examine the changes that occurred in the society and economy during the early medieval period.
6. Trace the major cultural achievements during the early medieval period.



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

8.1

1. Gurjara –
Pratiharas – Nagabhata
Palas – Gopala
Rashtrakutas – Krishna I

**Notes**

2. to maintain control over Kannauj
3. Mihira Bhoja
4. Dharmapala
5. Buddhism
6. Rajendra I as he was the conqueror of Ganga

8.2

1. King being main authority at top, shares his rule with other small chiefs (Samanthas). Whenever there was a weak king at the top, they would assert their independence leading to the breakup of the empire.
2. Cholas; Sabha and Ur.

8.3

1. Extension of agricultural activities in Rajasthan.

8.4

1. Nagara
2. Bronze image of Nataraja.

8.5

1. Java, Sumatra, Malay.
2. Angorvat (Cambodia); Barabudur (Java)

HINTS TO TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Refer 8.2 para 3
2. Refer 8.1
3. Refer 8.3 para 2
4. Refer 8.2 para 1
5. Refer 8.3 para 1&3
6. Refer 8.4