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Major Dynasties in India from Seventh to Twelfth Century

Between the seventh and twelfth centuries, many new dynasties emerged across the Indian subcontinent. The major ruling dynasties during this period included the Chahamanas in the northwest, the Palas in the eastern regions of Bengal and Assam, the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan, and the Paramaras, Gurjara-Pratiharas, and Chandelas in the northern and central parts of India. In the south, the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas were prominent kingdoms.

The geographical context of these kingdoms was marked by important rivers such as the Indus, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Yamuna, Narmada, Godavari, Tapi, and Krishna, which were vital for agriculture, trade, and settlement. The map of this period also shows fluctuating frontiers—regions where boundaries between kingdoms were unstable due to frequent conflicts.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: Locate the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Rashtrakutas, Palas, Cholas, and Chahamanas on the map. Can you identify the present-day states over which they exercised control?

A: The Gurjara-Pratiharas controlled parts of present-day Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh; the Rashtrakutas ruled over the Deccan region including parts of Karnataka and Maharashtra; the Palas ruled Bengal and Assam; the Cholas controlled Tamil Nadu and parts of southern India; and the Chahamanas were based around present-day Delhi and Rajasthan.

Emergence of New Dynasties

By the seventh century, powerful landlords and warrior chiefs known as samantas held sway in various regions. These samantas were often subordinate to kings but gained power and wealth, sometimes asserting independence. For example, the Rashtrakutas initially served under the Chalukyas but later, under Dantidurga, overthrew them and established their own rule.

Some rulers, like Kadamba Mayurasharman and Gurjara-Pratihara Harichandra, were Brahmanas who took up arms and established kingdoms, breaking traditional occupational roles.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: Was being born a Kshatriya important to become a ruler during this period?

A: While traditionally rulers were Kshatriyas, some rulers like the Rashtrakutas performed rituals to claim Kshatriya status, and others from Brahmana families took up arms and became kings, indicating that birth was not the only factor in becoming a ruler.

Administration in the Kingdoms

New kings adopted grand titles such as maharaja-adhiraja and tribhuvana-chakravartin but often shared power with samantas and local associations of peasants, traders, and Brahmanas. Revenue was collected from peasants, cattle-keepers, artisans, and traders, often as taxes or forced labor.

The Cholas, for example, had over 400 types of taxes, including land revenue (kadamai) and labor tax (vetti). These resources funded the king's establishment, temple construction, forts, and wars.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: Are any such taxes collected today?

A: Modern tax systems differ, but taxes on land, property, and services exist. Forced labor taxes like vetti are not practiced today.

Q: How was this form of administration different from the present-day system?

A: Administration was often hereditary and based on local power holders, unlike today's bureaucratic and democratic systems with elected representatives and formal institutions.

Prashastis and Land Grants

Prashastis were royal eulogies composed by Brahmanas to glorify rulers, often exaggerating their achievements. For example, the prashasti of Nagabhata, a Pratihara king, lists his victories over various regions and peoples.

Land grants were recorded on copper plates, which served as official documents. These grants detailed the boundaries, resources, and rights associated with the land, including tax collection and irrigation responsibilities.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: Why did rulers make grand claims in prashastis?

A: To legitimize their rule, demonstrate power, and gain support from subjects and Brahmanas.

Q: List the possible sources of irrigation mentioned in land grants and discuss their use.

A: Sources included wells, canals, tanks, rivers, and embankments. These were used to supply water for agriculture, prevent floods, and maintain fertile land.

Warfare for Wealth

Rulers fought to control strategic and wealthy regions, especially the city of Kanauj in the Ganga valley, leading to the tripartite struggle among the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Rashtrakutas, and Palas. Temples, being rich centers, were often targeted during wars.

Mahmud of Ghazni raided India multiple times, targeting wealthy temples like Somnath. The Chahamanas, including Prithviraja III, fought against invading Turk rulers but eventually lost to Sultan Muhammad Ghori.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: Why was Kanauj and the Ganga valley important to these rulers?

A: Kanauj was a political and economic center controlling trade routes and fertile lands, making it a valuable prize for rulers seeking power and wealth.

Q: Why might the Chahamanas have wanted to expand their territories?

A: To increase their power, control trade routes, access resources, and defend against rivals.

The Chola Dynasty

The Cholas rose to power in the Kaveri delta after Vijayalaya captured the region from the Muttaraiyar in the ninth century. The kingdom expanded under rulers like Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, who extended control over southern India, the Ganga valley, Sri Lanka, and parts of Southeast Asia.

The Cholas built magnificent temples such as those at Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram, which were centers of religious, economic, and cultural life. They were also known for exquisite bronze sculptures used in worship.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: How did geography influence the growth of the Chola kingdom?

A: The fertile Kaveri delta with its river channels supported agriculture, enabling population growth and economic prosperity, which helped the Cholas expand their kingdom.

Agriculture and Irrigation in Chola Kingdom

The Cholas developed advanced irrigation systems including canals, embankments, wells, and tanks to support large-scale rice cultivation. The Kaveri river's branching channels deposited fertile soil and provided water for multiple crops annually.

Irrigation required planning and cooperation among rulers and villagers to maintain water distribution and infrastructure.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: What irrigation methods did the Cholas use and why were they important?

A: They used canals, embankments, wells, and tanks to ensure water supply for agriculture, which was crucial for food production and economic stability.

Administration of the Chola Empire

The Chola administration was organized around villages (ur) and groups of villages (nadu). Village councils and nadu assemblies managed local affairs including justice and tax collection. Rich peasants held significant power under the supervision of the central government.

Land was categorized into types such as vellanvagai (non-Brahmana peasant land), brahmadeya (land gifted to Brahmanas), and devadana (land for temples). Brahmana assemblies (sabhas) managed brahmadeya lands efficiently.

Inscriptions from Uttaramerur describe a democratic process where committee members were chosen by lottery from eligible landowners with specific qualifications.

Exam-Oriented Question

Q: Did women participate in these assemblies? Are lotteries useful for choosing committee members?

A: There is no evidence of women participating in these assemblies. Lotteries helped ensure fairness and prevented concentration of power.

Q: Describe the activities in a typical village and why temple inscriptions might ignore them.

A: Villages had agrarian laborers, artisans, and daily life activities like farming, animal husbandry, and crafts. Temple inscriptions focused on elite and religious matters, often ignoring common people's lives.

Solved Examples

Example 1: Explain the significance of the tripartite struggle.

Answer: The tripartite struggle was a prolonged conflict among the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Rashtrakutas, and Palas for control over Kanauj, a strategic and wealthy city. This struggle shaped political boundaries and power dynamics in northern India during the early medieval period.

Example 2: Describe the role of temples in Chola society.

Answer: Temples were centers of worship, economic activity, and social life. They owned land, supported specialists like priests and artisans, and were hubs for craft production and cultural activities.

Practice Set

Easy

- Name two major kingdoms in southern India during the 7th to 12th centuries.
- What was the main river supporting the Chola kingdom?

Moderate

- Explain the significance of land grants in medieval India.
- What were the main sources of revenue for medieval Indian kings?

Challenging

- Discuss the administrative structure of the Chola empire and the role of village assemblies.
- Analyze the impact of warfare on the political landscape of India between the 7th and 12th centuries.

Answer Key

- **Easy 1:** Cholas and Pandyas.
- **Easy 2:** The Kaveri River.

- **Moderate 1:** Land grants were official gifts of land by kings to Brahmanas or temples, recorded on copper plates, granting rights to collect taxes and manage resources.
- **Moderate 2:** Revenue came from taxes on peasants, artisans, traders, and forced labor.
- **Challenging 1:** The Chola empire was organized into villages (ur) and groups of villages (nadu) with assemblies managing local administration, tax collection, and justice, involving local elites.
- **Challenging 2:** Warfare led to shifting boundaries, struggles for control over key regions like Kanauj, and influenced the rise and fall of dynasties.

Quick Reference

- **Samantas:** Local chiefs or landlords subordinate to kings.
- **Prashasti:** Royal eulogies praising rulers.
- **Brahmadeya:** Land grants given to Brahmanas.
- **Vetti:** Forced labor tax.
- **Tripartite Struggle:** Conflict among Gurjara-Pratiharas, Rashtrakutas, and Palas for Kanauj.
- **Sabha:** Assembly of Brahmana landholders managing land and administration.

Glossary

Samanta

A local chief or landlord who was often subordinate to a king but could gain power.

Prashasti

A royal inscription or eulogy praising a king's achievements.

Brahmadeya

Land granted to Brahmanas, often tax-free.

Vetti

A form of tax paid through forced labor instead of money.

Tripartite Struggle

A prolonged conflict among three dynasties for control over Kanauj.

Sabha

An assembly of Brahmana landholders managing local affairs and land.

Chronology of Major Events

| Time Period / Year | Event / Change | Importance |
|--------------------|--|--|
| 7th Century | Emergence of samantas and new dynasties | Shift in power dynamics; rise of regional kingdoms |
| Mid 8th Century | Dantidurga establishes Rashtrakuta independence | Start of Rashtrakuta empire in Deccan |
| 9th Century | Vijayalaya establishes Chola power in Kaveri delta | Foundation of Chola empire |
| 985 CE | Rajaraja I becomes Chola king | Expansion and administrative reforms of Chola empire |
| 1000-1025 CE | Mahmud of Ghazni raids India | Attacks on wealthy temples; impact on northern India |
| 1168-1192 CE | Reign of Prithviraja III (Chahamana ruler) | Resistance against Turk invasions; eventual defeat |