

Early Medieval Northern India [UPSC Notes]

The early medieval period in Northern India was marked by the domination of three political powers namely the Palas, the Rashtrakutas and the Gurjara-Pratiharas. In this article, you can read all about these three kingdoms, their political systems, administration, trade and commerce and the list of important kings from these dynasties. This is an important topic for the [UPSC exam](#) history segment.

Early Medieval Northern India (Period from c. 750 - 1000 CE)

This period of history was dominated by three political powers:

1. The Gurjara - Pratihara who ruled western India and the Upper Gangetic plains till the middle of the 10th century.
2. The Palas who dominated eastern India till the middle of the 9th century.
3. The Rashtrakutas who ruled the Deccan and also had control over some areas in north and south India. The Rashtrakutas ruled for a comparatively longer time and acted as a bridge between north and south India.

All the above kingdoms were in constant conflict with each other and tried to gain control over the Gangetic region in north India and this struggle between the three kingdoms is referred to as “**tripartite struggle**”.

The Pratiharas/Gurjara-Pratiharas

The Gurjaras were originally pastoralists and fighters. The epic hero Lakshmana, door-keeper to his brother, was looked upon as their hero. The Pratiharas took on their title which literally means “door keeper”.

- The [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) at Khajuraho is famous for the development of the Gurjara-Pratihara style of temple building.
- The kingdom was founded by Harichandra (Brahmana) in Jodhpur (southwestern Rajasthan).
- The dynasty gained importance in the second quarter of the 8th century, during the rule of Nagabhata I.

Rulers

Nagabhata I (c. 730 - 760 CE)

- He successfully resisted the invasion of the Arabs and defeated the Arab army during the Caliphate campaigns in India.
- Ruled over the areas of Gujarat, Rajputana and Malwa.

- Dhruva, the [Rashtrakuta](#) king defeated him.

Vatsaraja (c. 780 - 800 CE)

- He expanded his rule over a large part of north India. He made Kannauj (western Uttar Pradesh) his capital.
- His expansion policy created enemies for him - Dharmapala (the Pala king of Bengal) and Dhruva (the Rashtrakuta king). With this started the tripartite struggle which continued for about 350 years. However, Pratiharas exercised their control over Kannauj till the last.
- Dharmapala (the Pala king) was defeated by Vatsaraja and in turn, he was defeated by Dhruv (the Rashtrakuta king) in the tripartite struggle.

Nagabhata II (c. 800 - 833 CE)

- Dharmapala (Palas) was again defeated by Pratiharas - Nagabhata II, who was later defeated by Govind III (the Rashtrakuta king) in the tripartite struggle.
- He was succeeded by his son Ramabhadra, who ruled for a short span of time and was succeeded by his son Mihir Bhoja.

Bhoja I/Mihir Bhoja (c. 836 - 885 CE)

- He is considered to be the popular ruler of the Pratiharas and ruled for over 46 years.
- Earlier, he was defeated by the Rashtrakutas, the Palas and the Kalachuris but later, with the help of his feudatories - the Chedis and the Guhilas, he emerged successful and won over the Rashtrakutas and the Palas.
- He had his capital at Kannauj, which was also called Mahodaya. The Barrah Copper Plate inscription mentions a military camp at Mahodaya called Skandhavara.
- He was a great follower of Vaishnavism and assumed the title of “Adivaraha”.
- His supremacy was acknowledged by the Chandalas, the Kalachuris and the Arabs of Sindh.
- As per the Arab travellers, the Pratihara rulers had the best cavalry in India. He was titled “King Baura” by an Arab traveller named Al-Masudi.

Mahendrapala (c. 885 - 910 CE)

- He made significant contributions in further extending the Pratihara Empire - reached west to the border of Sindh, north to the Himalayas, east to Bengal and south past the Narmada.
- He fought a battle with the king of Kashmir but had to give some of his territories in Punjab which were won by Bhoja.
- Adopted the title “Maharajadhiraja of Aryavarta” (Great king of kings of northern India).

- An eminent Sanskrit poet, dramatist critic named Rajashekhar adorned his court. His works include Karrpuramanjari (written in Sauraseni Prakrit), Kavya Mimansa, Balabharata, Bhrijika, Vidhasalabhanjika, Prapanch Pandav, etc.

Mahipala I (c. 913 - 944 CE)

- The downfall of the Pratiharas started during his reign. The Rashtrakuta king, Indra III defeated him and destroyed the city of Kannauj.
- The Rashtrakutas took control over Gujarat as is mentioned by Al-Masudi in his accounts - 'the Pratihara empire had no access to the sea'.

Rajyapala (c. 960 - 1018 CE)

- This Pratihara ruler was defeated by the Rashtrakuta king Krishna III.
- Mahmud Ghazni raided Kannauj and Rajyapala had to flee from the battlefield.
- He was killed by Vindhyaadhar Chandela.

Yashpala (c. 1024 - 1036 CE)

- The last ruler of the Pratihara dynasty.
- By 1090 CE, the Gandhavalas conquered Kannauj.

The subsequent rulers could not revive the dynasty and gradually their feudatories declared independence and the empire was reduced to the area around Kannauj. In the 11th century CE, the Ghaznavids completely wiped off the Pratiharas from the political map and were succeeded by Chauhans/Chahamanas (Rajputana), the Paramaras/Pawars (Malwa) and the Solankis/Chalukyas (Gujarat).

Palas of Bengal

After the death of King Shashanka in c. 637 CE, there remained political uncertainty in Bengal and its adjoining areas. The region was attacked by Yashovarmana of Kannauj, Lalitaditya of Kashmir and even the Chola army. The ruler of Assam, Bhaskaravarman conquered most of Bengal and the western territories of Bihar and Orissa came under the control of Harsha. Subsequently, around the 8th century CE, Gopala laid the foundation of the Pala dynasty. Since the names of all the kings ended with Pala, the dynasty came to be known as the Pala dynasty which in Prakrit means "protector". The kingdom included Bengal and Bihar. The important cities of the Pala dynasty included Pataliputra, Ramvati (Varendra), Monghyr (Munger), Vikramapura, Tamralipti and Jaggadala. The areas of Bihar and modern east U.P remained a bone of contention between the Palas, the Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas. However, Bihar and Bengal remained mostly under the influence of the Palas.

The Pala kings followed Buddhism essentially, Mahayana and Tantric schools of Buddhism. They built monasteries (viharas) and temples in eastern India.

Gopala (c. 750 CE)

- Founder of the Pala dynasty. Gopala displaced the later Guptas of Magadha and Khadga dynasty of eastern Bengal.
- Follower of Buddhism and built the famous monastery at Odantapuri.

Dharmapala (c. 770 - 810 CE)

- During his reign, the Pala dynasty reached great heights. He conquered large parts of northern India, although he was earlier defeated by the Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas.
- His supremacy was accepted by the rulers of both west and south India such as those of Punjab, western hill states, Rajputana, Malwa and Berar.
- He was the founder of the **Vikramshila monastery** near Bhagalpur (Bihar) which had students from all parts of India and also from Tibet. One of the eminent Buddhist scholars Dipankara (also called Atisa) was associated with this university.
- He also founded the Somapuri monastery near Paharpur (Bihar).
- The renowned Buddhist scholar Santarakshita belongs to his reign. Santarakshita founded the philosophical school known as Yogacara - Svatantrika - Madhyamaka which integrated the Yogacara tradition of Asanga, the Madhyamaka tradition of Nagarjuna and the logical and epistemological thought of Dharmakirti.

Devapala (c. 810 - 850 CE)

- Devapala extended the Pala empire and included Assam (Kamarupa/Pragyoytishpur), parts of Orissa (Utkala) and modern Nepal. He claimed to have extracted tribute from the whole of north India - from the Himalayas to the Vindhyas and from the eastern to the western oceans.
- His inscriptions claim to have defeated the Hunas, the lord of Gurjaras (probably Mihir Bhoja) and the Dravidas.
- Devapala was an ardent follower of Buddhism. According to the Buddhist tradition, the Sailendra dynasty king, Balaputradeva (ruler of Suvarnavdipa which corresponds to the Indonesian archipelago - including Malaya, Java, Sumatra and other neighbouring islands), requested Devapala to grant five villages to the monastery at Nalanda. He accepted the request and appointed Viradeva as the head of the Nalanda monastery.
- Vajradatta - a Buddhist scholar who wrote Lokeshvarasataka was his court poet.
- In the middle of the 9th century, an Arab merchant Sulaiman visited India and called the Pala empire Ruhimi or Ruhima Dharma.

- The Pala rule declined in the late 9th century. The control of Pala rulers over northern India was too short-lived and were defeated in the tripartite struggle. The subordinate rulers of Assam and Orissa declared independence.

Mahapala I (c. 977 - 1027 CE)

- Dynasty was revived under Mahipala I in the late 10th century.
- He defended Pala bastions in Bengal and Bihar against Chola invasions but was defeated by Rajendra Chola.

Ramapala (c. 1072 - 1126 CE)

- Revived the Pala fortunes in the 11th century and gained control of Kamarupa and Kalinga.

The empire became weak by the 11th century. Vijaysena (Sena dynasty) destroyed the Pala Empire in the 12th century. **The Pala empire is considered to be the last major Buddhist power in the subcontinent.** The Palas built monasteries and great temples in the region. The Pala period is referred to as one of the golden eras in the history of Bengal. It brought both stability and prosperity to the region. The Palas were patrons of Buddhist universities - Nalanda and Vikramashila. Under the Pala rule, the proto-Bengali language developed which laid the foundation for the Bengali language. The first literary work of Bengal - the Charyapada which is a collection of mystic Buddhist poems was written in this era. The Palas had the best elephant cavalry. The rulers had diplomatic relations with the Srivijaya empire, the Tibetan empire and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate. The Abbasid coinage has been found at the Pala archaeological sites. The religion Islam appeared in Bengal during the Pala reign, which was the outcome of the flourishing trade between Bengal and the Middle East.

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The Rashtrakutas (c. 753 - 975 CE)

The period between c. 753 - 975 CE witnessed the rise of the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan. The chief of a Rashtra is the literal meaning of Rashtrakuta. They were feudatories of the Chalukyas and had their capital at Manyakheta or Malkhed near Sholapur. In the tripartite struggle, they defeated the Palas and the Pratiharas. They fought against the Pallavas of Kanchi, the Pandyas of Madurai and the Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi. The Arab merchants were allowed to build mosques during their reign which testifies their liberal attitude.

Rashtrakuta Rulers

Dantidurga (c. 733 - 756 CE)

- He was the founder of the Rashtrakuta dynasty. He annexed the Chalukya kingdom by defeating Kirtivarman II. Thus, the Rashtrakuta became the paramount power in the Deccan.
- He defeated the Gurjaras and captured Malwa from them.

Krishna I (c. 756 - 774 CE)

- Expanded the kingdom and brought major portions of Karnataka and Konkan under his rule.
- He built the magnificent rock-cut monolithic **Kailasa temple at Ellora**.

Dhruva (c. 780 - 793 CE)

- He further extended the empire and all the territories between the Kaveri river and central India came under his domain.
- He defeated the Palas of Bengal (Dharmapala) and Nagabhata II (Pratihara king).

Govind III (c. 793 - 814 CE)

- In the tripartite struggle, he defeated Dharmapala (the Pala king) and the Pratihara king Nagabhata II.
- The Rashtrakuta empire extended from Cape Comorin to Kannauj and from Banaras to Bharuch during his reign. He was compared with Alexander the Great and Arjuna of Mahabharata.
- He made expeditions to the south - the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Cheras paid tribute to him.

Amoghavarsha I (c. 815 - 880 CE)

- He built the Rashtrakuta capital-the city of Malkhed or Manyakheda.
- He made peace with his neighbours - the eastern Chalukyas, the Ganga and the Pallavas.
- He patronised art and literature. He himself wrote the famous Kannada work, Kavirajamarga (Kannada work on poetics).
- He is called '**Ashoka of the south**' for his peace-loving nature and his immense interest in art and literature.

Indra III (c. 914 - 929 CE)

- Grandson of Amoghavarsha. He defeated Mahipala I (Pratihara king) and sacked Kannauj.

Krishna III (c. 914 - 929 CE)

- He was famous for his expeditions. He marched against the Cholas and defeated them at Takkolam. He went further south and captured Tanjore. He went as far as Ramesvaram and occupied it for some time. He built several temples in the conquered territories including

the Krishneswara temple at Rameswaram. Throughout his reign, he possessed the Tondaimandalam region. After his death, the power of Rashtrakutas declined. In 972 CE, the Rashtrakuta capital - Malkhed was attacked and burnt to ashes.

The Rashtrakutas patronised Shaivism and Vaishnavism and were tolerant towards other religious sects like [Jainism](#) and Islam.

Life during these Three Kingdoms

Administration

- The administration was similar to that of the [Guptas](#), the Pushyabhutis and the Chalukyas in Deccan. The king was the head of administration as well as the commander-in-chief of the army. The kings were assisted by the ministers and their position was mostly hereditary. The kingdoms used to have a minister of revenue, treasure, foreign affairs, senapati, chief justice and purohita. Except for Purohita, all the ministers had to be part of military campaigns whenever the need arose.
- All the three kingdoms had large and well-organised cavalry, infantry and a good number of war elephants. The Pratiharas had the finest cavalry, the Palas had the largest number of elephants and the Rashtrakutas had the largest number of forts. Both regular and irregular troops were part of the infantry. The vassal chiefs also supplied troops at times of need. The vassals ruled independently over their areas but were bound to pay a fixed tribute, and supply quota of the army. They also fought against the king at times. It is believed that Palas and Rashtrakutas had their own naval troops.
- The king-administered territories were divided into:
 - **Rashtra** - Rashtrapati/Governor supervised the Rashtra.
 - **Bhukti** - Bhukti or provinces were headed by Uparika (Collected revenue and maintained law and order).
 - **Mandalas/Visaya (districts)** - headed by Visyapati (collected revenue and maintained law and order at district level).
 - **Pattala (cluster of villages)** - headed by Bhojpati.
 - **Village** - headed by the village headman and village accountant and these posts were mostly hereditary. The village elder (grama-mahajana or grama- mahattara) assisted the village headman. There were sub-committees that worked in close association with the village headman. Similar committees also existed in towns that had the participation of heads of trade guilds too. Kotwal/Kosha-pala maintained law and order in towns.
- The hereditary officials assumed high power and the authority of kings over these officials gradually diminished. The government became feudalised and the growth of feudalism weakened the position of king. This made the king more dependent on feudal chiefs which led to the rise of

small principalities having largely self-sufficient villages. However, these feudal states were not powerful enough to endow the safety of life and property to their masses.

- The state was secular as politics and religion were kept apart. The kings patronised Hinduism (Vaishnavism and Shaivism), Buddhism and Jainism. Muslims were allowed to practise their faith by the Rashtrakuta kings.

Trade and commerce

- In northern India, the period between c. 750 - 1000 CE, witnessed a huge decline in trade and commerce mainly due to two reasons:
 - Northern India had a flourishing trade with the Roman empire and its collapse largely impacted the trade.
 - The decline of the Sassanid empire (Iranian) due to the rise of Islam gave a huge blow to the Indian overland foreign trade.

The wealth of India in terms of gold and silver was mainly due to its foreign trade. The decline in trade led to the paucity of gold coins in northern India (between the 8th and 10th centuries). Interestingly, the trade between South India and the countries of south-east Asia increased during this period.

- Some of the Dharmashastras written during this period also reflect the decline in trade and commerce, as the ban was imposed on travel outside India. However, there are other accounts that mention the Indian merchants, medical men, craftsmen, etc. visiting Baghdad and other Muslim towns in west Asia during this period. Gradually, from the 10th century, foreign trade and commerce were revived with the emergence of the extensive Arab empire in West Asia and North Africa.

Salamba Dynasty of Assam (c. 800 - 1000 CE)

Kamarupa/Pragjyotisha (Assam) was under the domain of the Palas (mostly Devapala). However, in 800 CE, Harjaravarman - a local ruler of Kamarupa assumed control and established the Salamba dynasty with its capital at Haruppushvara on the banks of river Brahmaputra.

Eastern Gangas of Orissa

In the 8th century, the Gangas of Shvetaka who were originally from Karnataka took hold of the north Ganjam area. The Gangas of the Kalinganagara who were also migrants from Karnataka moved into Orissa towards the end of the 5th century and gained control over south Orissa (especially Vamsadhara and Nagavali valleys).

In the 10th century, both north and south Orissa integrated and the Ganga empire expanded rapidly. The Gangas were in alliance with the Cholas that helped in their military expansion. In the early 12th

century, the Ganga king - Anantavarman Chodaganga dethroned the Somavamshi ruler from lower Orissa. The fact that the Chola king Kulothunga I twice sent military expeditions against Kalinga implies the conflict between the Gangas and the Cholas.

