

# **HISTORY OF INDIA-I**

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\*\* This Unit has been adopted from **MAN-002** (Archaeological Anthropology), **Block 5** (Palaeolithic Cultures), **Units 1, 2, 3, 4** (Lower Palaeolithic Cultures, Middle Palaeolithic Cultures, Upper Palaeolithic Cultures, Palaeolithic Art) and **Block 6** (Mesolithic Cultures), **Units 1 & 2** (Mesolithic Features and Indian Mesolithic Cultures).

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\*\*\*\*This Unit has been adopted from **EHI-02** (India: Earliest Times to 800 A.D.), **Block 2** (Harappan Civilisation), **Unit 9** (Diffusion and Decline).

\*\*\*\*\*These Units have been adopted from **EHI-02** (India: Earliest Times to 800 A.D.), **Block 3** (Evolution of Early Indian Society: 2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), **Unit 12** (The Early Vedic Society) and **Unit 13** (Changes in the Later Vedic Phase).

\*\*\*\*\* This Unit has been adopted with some changes from **EHI-02** (India: Earliest Times to 800 A.D.), **Block 4** (India: 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.), **Unit 17** (Buddhism, Jainism and Other Religious Ideas).

\*\*\*\*\*These Units have been adopted from **EHI-02** (India: Earliest Times to 800 A.D.), **Block 5** (Polity, Society & Economy: 320 B.C. to 200 B.C.), **Unit 18** (Magadhan Territorial Expansion), **Unit 21** (Asoka's Policy of Dhamma), and **Unit 22** (Disintegration of the Empire).

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## **GUIDELINES FOR STUDY OF THE COURSE**

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In this Course we have followed a uniform pattern for presenting the learning material. This starts with an Introduction to the Course underlining the significant developments in chronological order and covers four major Themes with coverage of 19 sub-themes or Units. For the convenience of study, all the Units have been presented with a uniform structure. Objectives as the first section of the Unit have been included to help you find what are you expected to learn from the study of the Unit. Please go through these objectives carefully and keep reflecting and checking them after studying a few sections of the Unit. Introduction of the Unit introduces you to the subject area covered and guides you to the way subject matter is presented. These are followed by the main subject area discussed through sections and sub-sections for ease of comprehension. In between the text, some Check Your Progress Exercises have been provided. We advise you to attempt these as and when you reach them. These will help you assess your study and test your comprehension of the subject studied. Compare your answers with the answer guidelines provided after the Summary. The Key Words and unfamiliar terms have been provided at the end of each Unit. At the end of each Unit under Suggested Readings we have also provided a list of books and references. These include sources and books which are useful or have been consulted for developing the material for the concerned Unit. You should try to study them.

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

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India's history covers a long span of time. It was punctuated by changes in political, economic, social and religious aspects. Of course there were continuities too. The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the major changes and continuities which marked the various stages of history of India. It should be kept in mind that human communities all over the world did not go through the same pace of change and also that the nature of changes, where they took place, was not uniform. That is why when we study Indian society in different stages of its history, we should not expect that even when major changes took place in India, they were identical with what happened, say, in the history of China or in the history of Europe. There were of course stages of change in many societies which were similar in nature. For example, a significant change which took place in Indian society was the transition from food-gathering and hunting to farming. In a later stage, there was the emergence of State organisation. These are broad changes which took place in many other societies also at different points of time, but within these broad changes there were variations. When we study Indian history, we therefore need to know two things:

- 1) What were the major stages of change in Indian history and how did they come about?
- 2) What were the particular institutions and cultural elements in Indian society which may be considered different from those in other societies?

In Indian history when we use the term 'Ancient', we imply the existence of other periods such as 'Medieval' and 'Modern'. You shall be reading about the history of 'Medieval' and 'Modern' periods later on, but right now you may well ask the question: what is meant by 'Ancient' and what distinguishes the 'Ancient' from other periods of our history? Frankly speaking, this is not an easy question to answer. In one sense we have borrowed the idea of dividing the history of our country into three periods by following the writings on European history. But this division is not entirely without justification, although historians continue to debate as to when the 'Ancient' period ended and when the 'Medieval' period began.

In the history of a society we cannot arbitrarily choose a date to draw a sharp line between two periods but it is possible to distinguish the history of one period from that of another by comparing the major social, economic, political and cultural characteristics of these periods. In doing this, historians have come to feel that the historical processes and institutions which went into the making of the ancient period of our history and characterised its society started undergoing perceptible changes from about the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. There was of course never a complete break from the earlier period, but while certain old institution ceased to exist, others started acquiring new shapes. For example, the republican form of political organization which continued in many parts of northern India till the Gupta period went out of existence during it. In the area of economy, new types of agrarian relations emerged. Caste system which had started emerging from the Later Vedic period took new shapes in the post-Gupta period. There were further elements of regional cultures, like regional languages, which started crystallising in the post-Gupta period. All these changes perhaps indicate that a new phase in Indian history had begun in the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, although we will be wrong in thinking that they marked a sharp break with the earlier phase.

Another question which is relevant and which also you may feel like asking is: How do we know about historical events and historical changes which took place

so far back in the past? In other words, when historians write about the past what do they depend on since they cannot observe the past? A simple answer to this will be that human societies of all ages have left behind some indication in the form of surviving material, of how they lived. For example, we know about the human communities which lived as hunters and gatherers from the simple stone tools which they prepared and from other types of evidence – like the crude drawings which they made on their rock-shelters. But, in fact, the answer is not as simple as this. What the ancient people left behind has to be discovered and the meaning of what they left behind has to be understood properly, and in most cases, doing this involves work of several types of experts. We cannot make out how exactly a stone tool was made by simple looking at it; it is an expert — in this case a prehistoric archaeologist — who alone has the required training to provide information on this. Supposing an archaeologist comes across remains of animals the ancient hunter hunted, the animals have to be identified by another expert — a palaeontologist. Similarly, the dating of such remains to find out how far back in time do they go has to be done by another type of scientist in his laboratory.

This does not mean that finding out details about only such objects requires collaboration between different types of experts. If you are studying about an age when coins of metal were in use, the numismatist who specialises in the study of coins may give further details about them, but if you want to know the exact percentages of different metals used in making the coin, you shall again have to depend on laboratory tests carried out by scientists. Similarly, only a specialist epigraphist can read and give us the meanings of what was written in the form of inscriptions using different scripts and languages of the past. In the medieval period the ruler of Delhi Firoz-Shah-Tughlaq brought to Delhi Ashokan pillars on which were engraved inscriptions in unknown letters (you can still see one such pillar at Firuz-Shah-Kotla), but even the scholars of his period could not read the letters. It was only many centuries later that an employee of the English East India Company, James Prinsep, who after considerable efforts, finally deciphered the script in which the inscription and many other inscriptions of Ashoka were written.

These are some examples of how historians have to labour to gather information about the past, and the material remains and records from past societies from which they gather information are called sources of History. These sources of course are not uniform for all periods of History. For example, you have already found out that hunting/gathering communities have not left behind any written records because the art of writing was not known to them. Even after writing came to be known not all written records are of identical nature. Even so, historians have to depend on whatever sources are available to them and reconstruct the past for us. The reconstruction of the past of course does not mean that the historian gives us simply the contents or the information which the sources contain. He has to interpret them and thus make us interested in the meaning of the objects which have survived from the past and also in making connections between these objects. If the archaeologists simply arrange before us the tools of different stone ages, we shall not be able to either say how they were made or what use they were put to, nor shall we be able to see how the periods in which these tools were made were different from one another in many respects, in climate, in the mode of getting food, in the social organization of human groups and even in customs and beliefs. Let us take another example. From the study of written texts and from excavations carried out by archaeologists we come to know that cities emerged in the Ganga valley between the sixth century BCE and fourth century BCE. Since this was a new phenomenon in the history of this region, historians are required to explain, in addition to telling



us that cities emerged and in the context of the social situation of the period what they represented.

By giving us explanations and interpretations historians should help us think and even provoke us into questioning their explanations and their ways of understanding the past. This means that like in other areas of knowledge, history writing also keeps on changing and shifting its focus. This may to some extent explain why in the writing of ancient Indian history, historians have moved away from writing mainly about kings and their achievements and have taken up the study of different dimensions of society and of how changes took place in society. Between historians, interpretations or explanations vary; controversies exist in the explanations of various historical phenomena, and in addition to new sources which archaeologists epigraphists, numismatists and others bring to light, it is also new ways of looking at things and new questions which crop up which keep on expanding the horizon of our knowledge about the past and do not allow this knowledge to remain stagnant.

The Course on Ancient Indian history that you are going to study is divided into four **Themes**. Each Theme consists of a number of Units. Each Theme is intended to introduce to you a major concern or period which may be considered as significant in the context of the history of the ancient period of our country. **Theme I** is a broad category which deals with issues like geographical regions of India, sources of ancient Indian history, the tools, technology, society, and art of the Palaeolithic people in a regional context. Regions of India have been seen from a historical and geographical perspective. The Unit (1) explores the close relationship between humans and land. How historians and geographers have visualised the geographical space, and how the consciousness of space was present among the ancients are some of the issues addressed in the Unit. It also discusses important sources for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history. The last two Units (2 & 3) in the first Theme deal with prehistoric cultures. Attempt has been made to move beyond the discussions about origins and chronology and explore the nature of various archaeological cultures and the changes manifested by them. The analysis is based on empirical data, excavations, and tangible material remains. The prehistoric period of history is an important phase that provides the antecedents to the earliest history.

The second **Theme** explores the transition towards the proto-historic cultures of the Indian subcontinent. The first Unit (4) under this theme takes us to the beginnings of agriculture and domestication of animals. This slow, gradual change from Palaeolithic lifeways established new type of links between humans, animals and land and was revolutionary. The last three Units (5, 6, 7) deal with the Harappan civilization. The excavations carried out in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, in the 1920s changed our perception of Indian history. New cities dating back to 2600 BCE were discovered; even *ante* – dating the Vedic cultures. The Units deal with the processes by which the urban centres evolved gradually, their antecedents, town planning, social structure, trade, religion and decline.

In **Theme III** the focus will be on exploring the cultural profiles of different regions of India between the beginning of the second millennium BCE and 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Theme also underlines the fact that change was not a constant movement towards development. The highly urbanised Harappan culture suffered decline and gradually agriculture-based rural cultures were formed in all the major regions of the subcontinent. Small settlements based on small scale farming come to be transformed into regular rural settlements of later periods. Initially the cultures of the small farming settlements were Chalcolithic, but from the beginning of the first millennium BCE, iron came to be known to different cultures, for example, Painted Grey Ware

culture of the Upper Ganga valley as also the megalithic cultures of peninsular India. The impact of this metal on different cultures is yet to be properly assessed but the point can be forcefully made that all the crucial ingredients of village life such as the techniques of cultivation (even of irrigation), production of varieties of major crops cultivated even today and combining farming with rearing domesticated animals were present in some measure or the other in the regional cultures of the subcontinent between the second millennium BCE and first millennium BCE. This widespread cultural pattern, of course, co-existed with other cultural patterns such as pastoralism and we must also remember that despite the emergence of farming communities, hunting and gathering continued as a way of life. Secondly, in the Ganga valley, the pace of historical change became suddenly fast from the first millennium BCE onward. The Vedic texts along with archaeological material are used to reconstruct the society, economy, polity of the Early Vedic and the Later Vedic period. A new type of society emerged which meant that people living in it had new questions about life, sought meanings in life and had new aspirations. The *Upanishads*, the teachings of the Buddha and Mahavira, and various other types of ideas of the period sought answers to life's problems. Buddhism and Jainism spread rapidly in the centuries that followed.

The last **Theme IV** is concerned with the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE till the end of the Mauryan period. The changes taking place in the Vedic period matured in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Large territories of *mahajanapadas* emerged; monarchies and republics formed. 'Second Urbanization' flourished. Historians place the beginning of the early historical period of Indian history in this phase. The use of metallic money, trade, rise of powerful *gahapatis* and *setthis*, cities and towns bred a sense of alienation among the people. A complex social order arose in which relations between the different social groups was defined. The *Caturvarna* system which appeared in the Later Vedic phase provided the theoretical frame in which society was organized. The fight for supremacy among the *mahajanapadas* resulted in the emergence of Magadha as the most powerful *mahajanapada*. It is during this period that India's northwest came to play a significant role in Indian politics. The great Persian empire was crushed by the expanding army of Alexander of Macedonia of North Greece. He advanced to Panjab plains and fought valiant battles with territories of this region headed by their warriors. The contact with the Persians and the Greeks, opened up north-western part of the subcontinent to Persian and Greek cultural influences. Later the Mauryas laid the basis of a huge empire which incorporated the north-west too. The last two Units (18 & 19) take a sweeping view on the status of gender in ancient India and how in the fields of environment, science and technology ancient Indians achieved and accomplished a lot.

The History Elective Course, EHI-02 was written more than twenty years back. When it was published for the first time, thanks to the work of distinguished panel of experts, Convenor and Course preparation team, it was well appreciated. Now, IGNOU is bringing out a revamped course which will address substantial changes in the readings of early Indian history. Since the 1990s much more data has been brought to light. The new interpretations of the existing data also require a fresh look at various issues of early India. An attempt has been made to incorporate such changes in the present Course.

**BLOCK 4**  
**INDIA: 6<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BCE TO 200 BCE**



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## UNIT 13 *JANAPADAS AND MAHAJANAPADAS\**

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### Structure

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Sources: Literary and Archaeological
- 13.3 Chiefships to Kingdoms: *Janapadas, Mahajanapadas, Ganasanghas*
- 13.4 Foundations of Urbanization: Changes in the Countryside
- 13.5 The 'Second Urbanization'
  - 13.5.1 Archaeological Markers of Urbanization
  - 13.5.2 Early Historical Cities in Literature
- 13.6 Social Stratification in Urban Centers
  - 13.6.1 Trade and Traders
  - 13.6.2 The New Investors: *Gahapati* and *Setthi*
- 13.7 Society
- 13.8 Summary
- 13.9 Key Words
- 13.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 13.11 Suggested Readings

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### 13.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the reasons as to why sixth century BCE was a major landmark in Indian history;
- the various kinds of political formations that came into existence, both monarchical and non-monarchical; and
- the economic and social complexity that emerged in this period.

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### 13.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The period c.600-300 BCE marks the beginning of the early historical period in north India. It was a major landmark in Indian history which had far reaching consequences. For the first time in Indian history, several territorial political entities emerged. These were called the *mahajanapadas*, and they spread over most of north India. Cities and city life, which declined after the Harappan civilization, emerged once again along the Ganga valley and spread to the far reaches of the northwest.

A number of new religious groups and thoughts emerged to counter the ritual and religious supremacy of the brahmanas. Foremost among these movements, as we have studied, were Buddhism and Jainism. Cities emerged and trade expanded. The use of metallic money, along with the emergence of affluent classes,

guilds, deluxe potteries, usury, increase in population, craft and specialization, reading and writing made this period a vibrant phase. These simultaneous and interrelated changes in the political, material and cultural life, in north India in particular are called the 'Second Urbanization' in Indian history.

This Unit will look at the various political formations that emerged in the subcontinent in the sixth century BCE – *janapadas*, *ganasanghas*, *mahajanapadas*, etc. We will also see how these were inter-linked with changes in the economic sphere – particularly in terms of agrarian and commercial expansion. Lastly we will look at the various social categories and groups that were prevalent in this period.

By the end of this period, one polity, i.e., the Magadha emerged the strongest, which we will study in the next Unit.

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## 13.2 SOURCES: LITERARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL

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The period 600 BCE - 300 BCE has rich evidence from both literary and archaeological sources. Let us discuss them briefly below.

Early Buddhist literature is generally divided into canonical and non-canonical texts. Canonical texts are the books which lay down the basic tenets and principles of a religion or sect. The canonical literature is primarily the *Tripitaka* books (The Three Baskets/ Collections). The *Tripitakas* consists of three books — the *Sutta*, *Vinaya*, and *Abhidhamma*. The *Sutta Pitaka* contains the Buddha's discourses on various doctrinal issues in dialogue form. The *Vinaya Pitaka* has rules for monks and nuns of the *sangha* (monastic order). The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* is a later work, and contains a thorough study and systemization of the teachings of the *Sutta Pitaka* through lists, summaries, and questions and answers. The *Jatakas* dealing with the stories of the previous births of the Buddha are part of the *Sutta Pitaka*. The composition of the basic core of the Pali *Tripitaka* is dated to between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. The Buddhist canon can be roughly situated geographically to the middle Ganga valley, i.e., modern day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh.

The *Brahmana* texts deal with the methods of performing Vedic rituals. Similarly, the *Upanishads* dealing with philosophical problems are also considered a part of the Vedic literature. These texts were composed from 800 BCE onwards. They refer to many *Janapadas* and *Mahajanapadas* and provide us insights into the settlement of agricultural communities.

Archaeology for example, is one of the most important sources for the history of the subcontinent in the period 600 BCE to 300 BCE. Particularly significant are the two types of pottery used in this period – Black-and-Red Ware (BRW) and Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). The NBPW in particular is considered a deluxe pottery and noted for its technological excellence. The evidence from NBPW sites includes an early series of punch-marked coins, which mark the beginning of the use of money in the subcontinent. Many sites mentioned in the texts have been excavated such as Ahichchhatra, Hastinapura, Kaushambi, Ujjaini, Shravasti, Vaishali etc. Material evidence which is useful for this period are house remains, objects used by the people, potteries, coins etc.

### 13.3 CHIEFSHIPS TO KINGDOMS: *JANAPADAS*, *MAHAJANAPADAS*, *GANASANGHAS*

The term *janapada* literally means the place where a group of people, or a tribe/clan (*jana*) place their foot (*pada*). The *janapadas* were thus well-defined territories inhabited by people over whom ruled a political authority. The transition from chiefships to kingdoms is linked to two phases. First is the performance of major sacrifices, *yajnas*, where the priests bestowed a divine status on the chief (*raja*). The second phase is the emergence of the state in the form of *janapadas* and *mahajanapadas*. The *mahajanapadas* were larger and more powerful than *janapadas*, and their rulers exercised greater power and enjoyed more prominence than the rulers of the *janapadas*.

Around the sixth century BCE, several cities and states emerged in a belt stretching from Gandhara in the north-west to Anga in eastern India, extending into central India and the Deccan. Buddhist canonical texts in Pali, like the *Anguttaranikaya*, enlist 16 powerful states, the *solasa-mahajanapadas* (Map 13.1) which existed in the lifetime of the Buddha. These are as follows:

#### In the Middle Ganga Valley

##### 1) *Anga*

Anga roughly corresponds to present day Bhagalpur and Monghyr districts of eastern Bihar. Located at the confluence of the Ganga and Champa rivers, its capital city of Champa is identified with modern day Champagnagara or Champapura village near Bhagalpur. One of the greatest cities of the sixth century BCE, the capital city of Champa was an important commercial centre located on the trade routes of the time. Excavations at Champa have revealed the city being surrounded by defensive fortifications including a moat. Travel accounts often describe merchants as sailing overseas from Champa to Suvarnabhumi (a possible reference to Southeast Asia).

##### 2) *Magadha*

The kingdom of Magadha was to become the foremost political entity by the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The kingdom roughly covered the areas of modern day Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar. It was bound by the Ganga, Son and Champa rivers on the north, west, and east respectively and the Vindhyan range on the south. Its first capital was Girivraja or Rajagriha, modern Rajgir. This city was closely associated with the lives of the Buddha as well as Mahavira. However later, its capital shifted to Pataliputra, often associated with modern Patna. Excavations at Rajagriha have revealed a number of defense structures like stone fortification walls dating to about the times of Bimbisara and Ajatashatru, i.e., the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

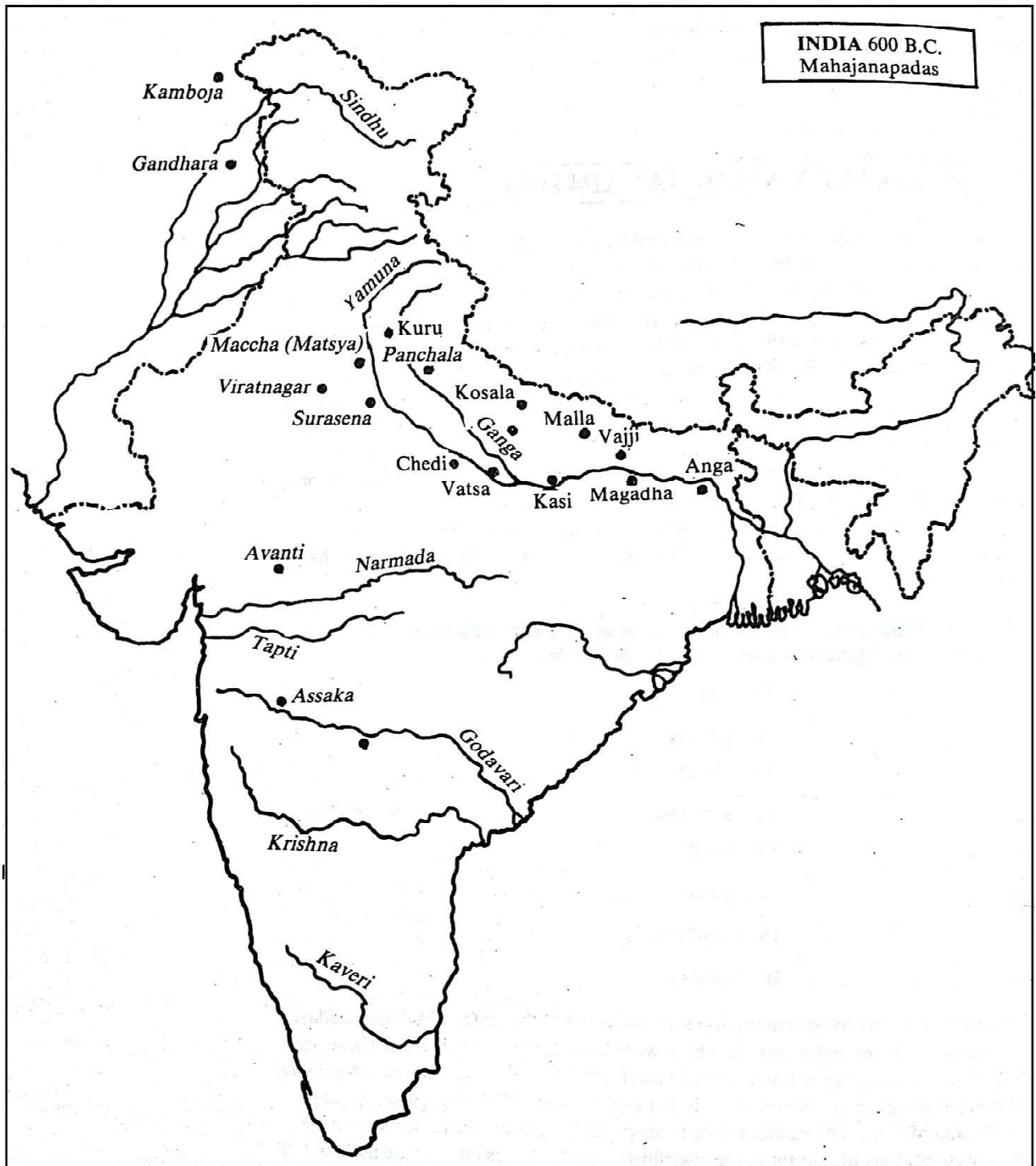
##### 3) *Vajji/Vrijji Confederacy*

The Vrijji *ganasangha* was in eastern India, north of the Ganga with its capital at Vaishali. It has been identified with the area of Basadh, near Muzaffarpur area in Bihar. The Vrijji confederacy is counted as one among the most prominent *mahajanapadas* during the age of the Buddha. Magadha under the king Bimbisara also established marriage alliances with the Vrijji *ganasangha*. Most historians consider the Vrijjis/Vajjis as a confederacy of

eight or nine clans. This means that in this confederacy the clans maintained an equal, and independent status, thus closely preserving their own identity even within the confederation. While *ganasanghas*, especially the Vrijjis, have often been described in Buddhist and Jaina texts as kshatriya clans; this should not lead us to presume that they observed a *varna* society. They retained more of the clan tradition than did the kingdoms. They governed through an assembly representing the clan, even if the assembly was restricted to the heads of clans or families.

4) *Mallas*

The Mallas, located further west to the Vajjis, were a confederacy of nine clans. There were two main political centres within this principality –





Kusinara and the capital Pava. Kusinara has been identified with Kasia, about 77 km east of Gorakhpur. While some historians identify Pava with modern day Pawapuri in Bihar, yet others identify it with Padaraona village about 26 km north-east of Kasia. The Mallas were close allies of the Vajjis. However, there were occasional conflicts between them as well.

### To their West

#### 5) *Kashi*

One of the earliest *mahajanapadas* to gain political prominence was the kingdom of Kashi. It was bound by the Varuna river in the north and the Asi river in the south. It is from these two rivers that its capital city Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganga, got its name. The *Jatakas* refer to a long-standing rivalry between the kingdoms of Kashi and Kosala. Eventually under the reign of Kosalan king Prasenajit (Pasenadi in Pali), the feud ended with Kashi getting absorbed into the Kosalan kingdom. Kashi today is identified with the area adjoining Benaras in Uttar Pradesh.

#### 6) *Kosala*

The powerful kingdom of Kosala was bound by the Sadanira (modern day Gandak) on the east and the Gomati on the west, the Sarpika or Syandika (Sai) on the south, and the Nepal hills to the north. The capital of north Kosala was Shravasti, identified with the modern-day twin villages of Sahet-Mahet, and the capital of south Kosala was Kushavati. Maheth was a city and Saheth has been identified as the site of the ancient monastery of Jetavana. According to the Buddhist tradition, Jetavana was gifted by the lay devotee Anathapindika to the Buddhist *sangha*. Saket and Ayodhya were the other two important centres within the kingdom. Pasenadi (also known as Prasenajit) was an immensely popular ruler of Kosala, and a contemporary of the Buddha. Kosala today can be identified with the areas of Lucknow, Gonda, Faizabad, Baharaich of Uttar Pradesh.

#### 7) *Vatsa*

Vatsa or Vamsa was a kingdom known for its fine cotton textiles. Its capital was situated at Kaushambi, near modern Prayagaraj. Kausambi was an important point on the trade routes connecting the Deccan, the Ganga valley and the north-west. Excavations here have revealed imposing defense structures dating to about the 600 BCE. Vatsa was a powerful *mahajanapada* under the leadership of the famous king Udayana. Around the same time, king Pradyota was ruling Avanti. The rivalry between the two is the subject of many legends. In fact king Udayana featured as the protagonist of at least three Sanskrit dramas from later periods – the *Svapna-Vasavadatta* of Bhasa and the *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarshika* of Harsha.

### Further West

#### 8) *Kuru*

The Kurus were settled in the modern day Ganga-Yamuna *Doab* region. According to the Buddhist tradition, the Kuru kingdom was ruled by kings belonging to the Yuddhitthila *gotta* (*gotra*), i.e., the family of Yudhishtira, with their capital at Imdapatta (Indraprastha). In the Epics, the Kuru capital was located at Hastinapura till a flood led to its being shifted to Kaushambi.

The Jaina text, *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* refers to a Kuru king named Isukara who ruled from the town of Isukara. The Kurus up to the time of the Buddha were a monarchy. Subsequently they become a *ganasangha*. We also know that they established matrimonial relations with the Yadavas, Bhojas, and Panchalas.

9) *Panchala*

The Panchala *mahajanapada* included the present day Rohilkhand area and was divided into two parts by the river Ganga. The kingdom also had two capitals – the capital of Uttara (north) Panchala was Ahichchhatra, (identified with modern Ramnagar in Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh) (Figure 13.1) and the capital of Dakshina (south) Panchala was Kampilya, (identified with Kampil in Farukhabad district, UP). According to the *Arthashastra*, the Panchalas were initially a monarchical state and later switched to a non-monarchical form of government. The *mahajanapada* had important urban centres, such as Kanyakubja or Kanauj.



Fig.13.1: Remains at Ahichchhatra. Credit: Suneet87. Source: Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ahichchhatra\\_Fort\\_Temple\\_Bareilly.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ahichchhatra_Fort_Temple_Bareilly.jpg)

10) *Matsya*

The Matsyas were situated near the eastern parts of present day Rajasthan, comprising of areas in and around Jaipur, Alwar and Bharatpur. Their capital was Viratnagara (modern Vairat), named after the founder of the kingdom, king Virata. Buddhist texts usually associate the Matsyas with Surasenas.

11) *Surasena*

The Surasenas were also located in the Yamuna *doab* region, with their capital at Mathura. According to the Buddhist tradition, one Surasena king, Avantiputra was a Buddhist disciple. His very name (literally meaning ‘son of Avanti’) hints at a matrimonial alliance between the Surasenas and Avanti. Like many other political centres, Mathura too was an important junction on the trade routes, connecting the north to the Deccan as well as to the western coast.

12) *Gandhara*

The kingdom of Gandhara comprised modern day Peshawar and Rawalpindi districts in Pakistan. Its capital, Takshasila or Taxila was a major centre of trade and learning. Excavations at Taxila have revealed three major settlements — the Bhir mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh. The Bhir mound represents the oldest city. In the earliest levels of Bhir mound, silver punch-marked bar coins and other coin types have been found. Around the sixth century BCE, Gandhara was being ruled by king Pukkusati or Pushkarasarin, who successfully waged a war against Avanti. He also maintained cordial relations with Magadha.

13) *Kamboja* (in the Hazara district of Pakistan)

Closely associated with Gandhara was the kingdom of Kamboja. Kamboja included the present day area of Rajaori, which is in the Hazara district of Pakistan. The Kambojas were a monarchy till about the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but the later text *Arthashastra* refers to them as a *ganasangha*.

**In the Central and Deccan regions**14) *Avanti*

The *mahajanapada* of Avanti was located in the Malwa region of central India. Avanti had two capitals, one at Ujjayini (near modern Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh) and the other at Mahishmati (identified with modern day Mandhata in the western part of Madhya Pradesh). Both the cities were important centres on the trade routes that connected north India with the Deccan and also with the ports on the western coast. Avanti was well known for its famous king Pradyota, under whose reign Avanti entered into military conflicts with Vatsa, Magadha, and Kosala.

15) *Chedi* (capital Suktimati, located in the area around present-day Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh). The Chedi kingdom was situated in the eastern part of Bundelkhand in central India. Scholars have identified its capital Sotthivatinagara with the Shuktimati or Shuktisahvaya of the *Mahabharata*. The ancient cities of Tripuri in the Narmada valley near Jabalpur, and the Airakina (Eran) near Sagar were also probably part of the Chedi kingdom.

16) *Assaka, or Asmaka* (capital Govardhana, near Nander in the Godavari valley in Maharashtra). The kingdom of Assaka finds mention in a range of texts such as Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, the *Markandeya Purana*, the *Brihatsamhita*. Buddhist texts locate Assaka along the Godavari river in Maharashtra. Its capital was Potana/Podana, and is identified with modern Bodhan. The *Jatakas* suggest that Assaka at some point had come under the sway of Kashi, and that it achieved military victory over Kalinga in eastern India.

It is interesting to note that there existed minor variations in the enumeration of these 16 states in different sources. Thus for example, the *Mahavastu* substituted Gandhara and Kamboja with the states of Sibi (in the Punjab) and Dasharna (in central India). Similarly the *Bhagavati Sutra* listed the 16 *mahajanapadas* as: Anga, Banga (Vanga), Magaha (Magadha), Malaya, Malava, Achchha, Vachchha (Vatsa), Kochchha, Ladha, Padha (Pandhya or Paundra), Bajji (Vajji), Moli (Malla), Kasi (Kashi), Kosala, Avaha, and Sambhuttara. (Singh, 2008: 261).

Broadly these lists covered two kinds of state formations, the monarchical kingdoms and the non-monarchical polities called the *gana-sanghas*. Most of the monarchical *mahajanapadas* were concentrated in the fertile Ganga plains. In contrast, the *gana-sanghas* lay around their periphery, in the Himalayan foothills, or in north-western India, Punjab and Sindh or central and western India. Their location suggests that the *gana-sanghas* probably pre-dated the kingdoms, since the low-lying hills would have been easier to clear than the marshy jungles in the plains. It is also possible that they were established by individuals with a liberated mindset who moved from the plains up towards the hills to establish communities with more egalitarian traditions since they were not satisfied with the growing orthodoxy and the rigid caste system of the plains. In fact, teachers of the two most important heterodox sects came from these *gana-sanghas*: Mahavira, associated with Jainism, belonged to the Jantrika clan, a part of the Vriji confederacy; and the Buddha, who was born in the Sakya clan.

Historians have understood the *gana-sanghas* variously as republics or oligarchies. In the *gana-sanghas*, unlike the monarchical kingdoms, power was diffused, i.e., power was exercised collectively, by a group of people. The *ganas* were closely associated with the *kshatriyas* and were named after the ruling *kshatriya* clan; members were linked to each other through real or claimed kinship ties. Social stratification in these polities was limited. The *gana-sanghas* had only two strata – the *kshatriya rajakula*, i.e., the ruling families, and the *dasa-karmakara*, i.e., the slaves and labourers. Land was owned collectively by the clan, but was worked on by labourers and slaves, the *dasa-karmakaras*. It is also important to note that while kinship ties bound the clan together, the labouring class of the *karmakaras* were non-kin labour. In terms of governance, there was no single hereditary monarch, but instead a chief known as the *ganapati*, or *ganaraja*, or *sanghamukhya*.

However most of the *mahajanapadas* were monarchies. In contrast to the *gana-sanghas*, the kingdoms were ruled by a sovereign king. Power was concentrated in one ruling family, which became a dynasty. Succession to kingship became hereditary, based generally but not always, on primogeniture. Moreover the most powerful monarchies of the time developed a standing army – a permanent corps of troops recruited and maintained by the state. The emergence of these states and proto-states was a process deeply interlocked with the process of urbanization. The foundations of this process however must be traced to changing subsistence patterns. By the time of the sixth century BCE, society had become familiar with settled agriculture for some time. Then what changed?

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### 13.4 FOUNDATIONS OF URBANIZATION: CHANGES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

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The term *janapada* also denoted the countryside, distinct from urban centres like *pura* or *nagara*. It was an area rich in resources, especially agrarian. As has been mentioned before, most of *mahanapadas* emerged in the fertile Ganga plains. The formation of states was dependent, amongst other things, on not just agrarian resources, but the production of an agrarian surplus. The managing and redistribution of this surplus became the basis of power.

By the sixth century BCE, settled agrarian society had become well-established in the Indo-Ganga divide, the upper Ganga valley and the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*. High rainfall, along with its fertile alluvial soil made the region particularly well-

suitable for paddy cultivation. Panini's grammar treatise also displays in-depth agricultural knowledge. For example, the grammarian mentions that a well-ploughed land was called *suhali*. A *vraiheya* type of plot was the most suitable for cultivation of paddy (*vrihi*), *yavya* for growing wheat (*yava*), and *tilya* for sesame (*tila*). All sources however considered paddy as the principal crop, and the best kind of paddy was known as *sali*. Technological advancements combined with the advantages of the fertile plains naturally aided greater production.

An increase in crop production had important consequences. Firstly, growth in production would have increased collection of agricultural taxes by the kings of the *mahajanapadas*. Revenue from these taxes would have been crucial for maintaining the administrative and military apparatus. Thus, it was the foundational basis of a State system. Secondly, studies have shown that rice-consuming societies have higher fertility rates. Thus paddy production in the fertile Ganga valley would have led to demographic growth. This increased population was necessary for the emerging urban centers. Urban centres had more residents, and a higher density of population than the villages. Thirdly, an agricultural surplus was necessary to sustain those townspeople who did not grow their own food. As will be discussed in the next section, the city was inhabited by a range of non-agrarian professionals such as physicians, scribes, entertainers, craftspersons, artisans, etc. We'll discuss this occupational diversity in the later sections of this Unit.

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### 13.5 THE 'SECOND URBANIZATION'

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The period of about three centuries, from 600 BCE to 300 BCE is marked by what is called the 'Second Urbanization' in Indian history. Nearly a millennium after the Harappan urbanism, cities and city life emerged once again around the sixth century BCE in north India. Evident in this second phase was a noticeable shift in the geographical context of urbanization. The site of urbanization shifted from the Indus Valley (in the first phase) to the Ganga valley (in the second phase). The same process was slightly later for south India.

The emergence of towns and cities was not uniform. Some, like Hastinapura, Rajagrhya in Magadha, Shravasti in Kosala, and Kaushambi in Vatsa, grew up as political and administrative centres, as hubs of power. Yet others were important nodal points for trade and operated as exchange centres for the surrounding hinterland. The commodities for the beginning of such large-scale exchange were often mundane, but essential items such as salt or grain. Some cities became important junctures on trade routes that were moving more expensive and prestigious goods, such as Ujjain. Some urban centres also emerged as sacred centres, where people would often gather for various ritual purposes, as was the case with Vaishali. A concentration of people, and a wider scope of occupations and products became defining features of urban centres.

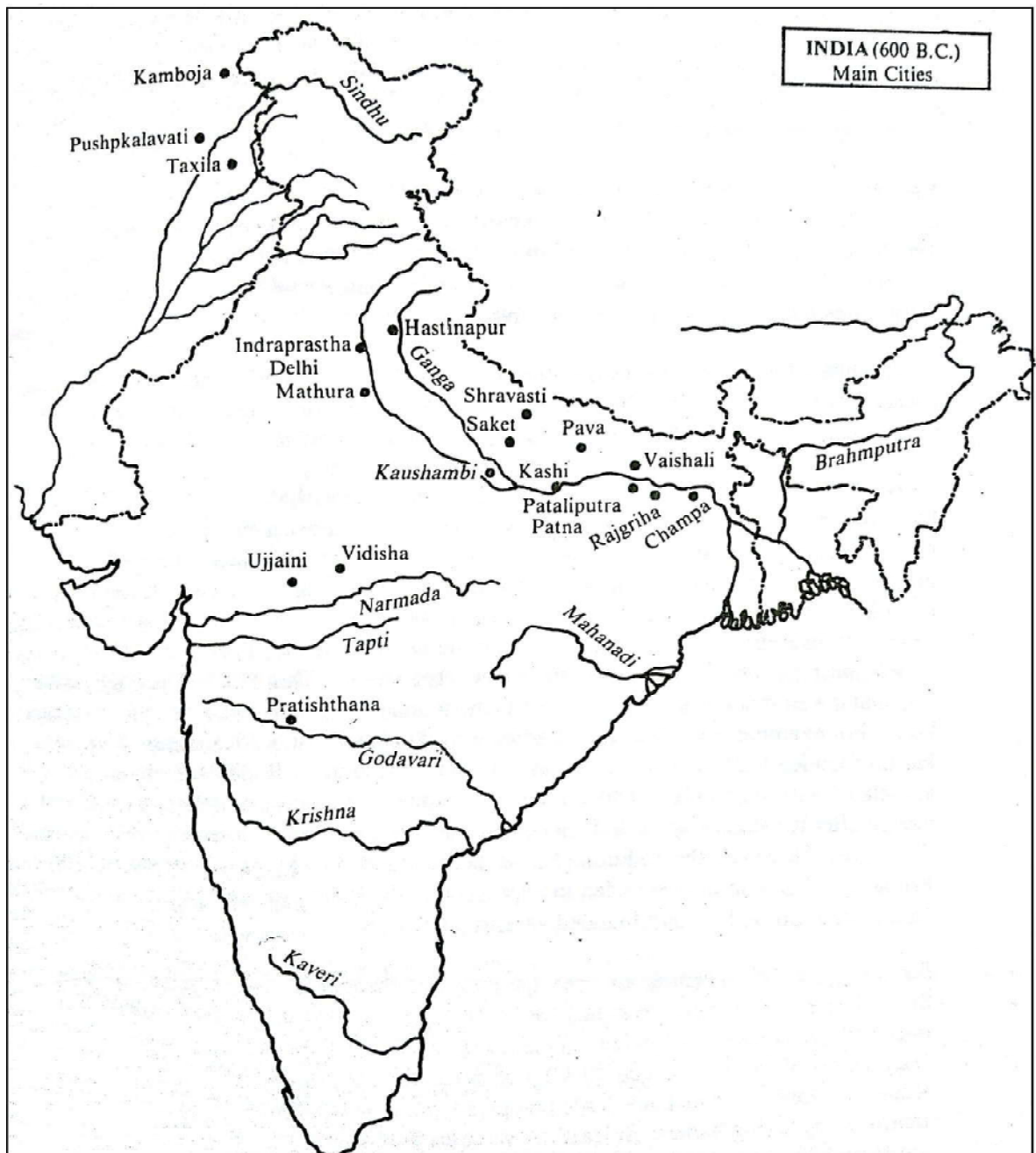
According to the narratives available from textual sources, cities often emerged from a group of villages specializing in professions such as blacksmithing, pottery, carpentry, cloth-weaving, basket-weaving, etc. Specialized craftsmen tended to congregate at places which offered either proximity to raw material (such as clay for potters or timber for carpenters) or proximity and accessibility to market for distribution of their crafted items. Their concentration in a particular area set the foundation for the evolution of a town; a concentration of craftspersons in turn gave boost to production and distribution, pushing the town into becoming a

commercial centre. Cities such as Vaishali, Shravasti, Champa, Rajagriha, Kaushambi and Kasi (Map 13.2) are great examples of such commercial centres, boosting the economy of the Ganga valley. Similarly cities such as Ujjain, Taxila and the port of Bharuch provided a geographical gateway to markets beyond the Ganga plains.

Thus, we see that cities with varied functions and identities emerged. While some grew as centres of political authority, some were centres of craft production and manufacturing, and yet others were important locus points in trade; while some combined all three functions.

### 13.5.1 Archaeological Markers of Urbanization

The archaeological evidence has revealed urban centres as having consistent and strikingly similar layouts. Most often, the town would be enclosed by a moat or a rampart, and was sometimes fortified. The ramparts were either filled with earth, as in Rajghat, or later built with bricks as at Kaushambi. For the towns



Map 13.2: Main Cities in 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. Source: EHI-02, Block 4.

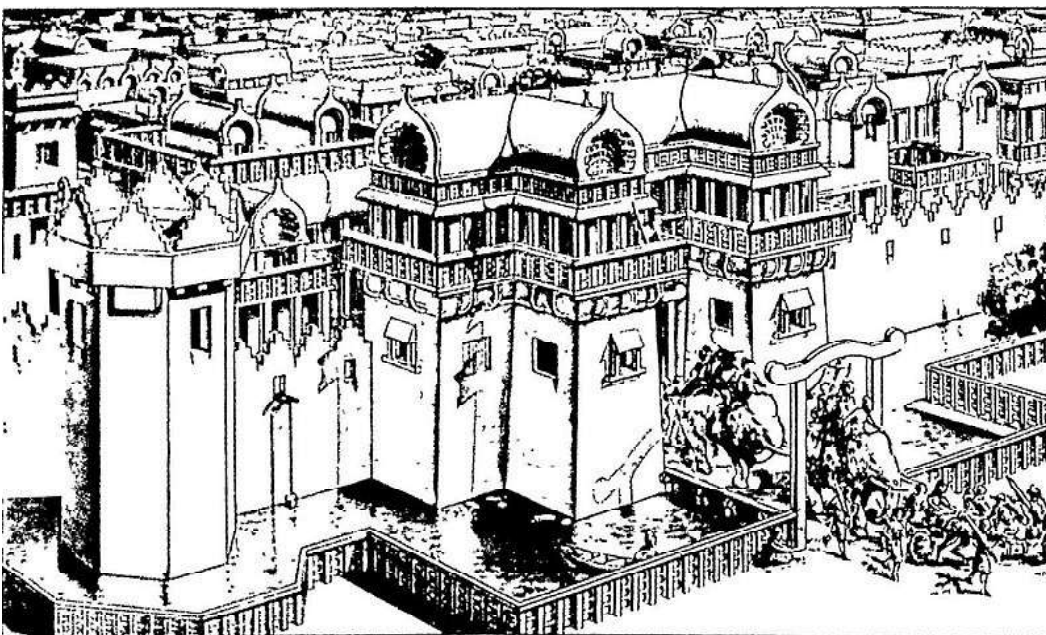
bordering rivers, the ramparts would have also served as protection against floods, in addition to their function as primary line of defense against predators and raids.

*Why did towns need such military protection?*

Other than being administrative centres, the town was where all the revenue was collected from adjoining areas and stored in the treasury. This increased their vulnerability to attack and thus necessitated fortified defense structures (Figure 13.2). In addition, these fortifications also worked as a physical boundary, clearly demarcating the town from the village.

In addition, excavations have also revealed few features distinctly linked with urbanization. These included facilities such as burnt bricks, drainage, ring wells and soakage pits, markedly different in form from those found in Harappan cities. Houses were better built than in the previous ages. At the Bhir mound for instance, houses were built around a courtyard. Scholars have postulated that rooms that opened directly on to the streets could have been shops (Thapar, 2002: 141). The streets themselves were levelled, indicating that wheeled traffic was in use.

The most important archaeological evidence associated with urbanism is the pottery called Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). Most archaeological excavations at early historical cities have shown that the NBPW phase was coterminous with urbanization. For example, excavations at Purana Qila in Delhi have revealed NBPW levels dating to 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. Some of the artefacts found from these levels include terracotta figurines of humans and animals, a fragment of a sculpted ring stone, a clay sealing, a terracotta piece depicting a horse and an armoured rider. Similarly, the NBPW phase at Hastinapura, labelled Period III, is marked with an element of planning, burnt-brick structures and terracotta ring well. Thus, the NBPW levels at excavated sites were clearly associated with urban features.



**Fig.13.2: Conjectural reconstruction of the Main gate of Kusinagara circa 500 BCE, Adapted from a Relief at the Southern Gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. Credit: Percy Brown. Wikimedia Commons**

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Conjectural\\_reconstruction\\_of\\_the\\_main\\_gate\\_of\\_Kusinagara\\_circa\\_500\\_BCE\\_adapted\\_from\\_a\\_relief\\_at\\_Sanchi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Conjectural_reconstruction_of_the_main_gate_of_Kusinagara_circa_500_BCE_adapted_from_a_relief_at_Sanchi.jpg))

### 13.5.2 Early Historic Cities in Literature

Literary authors often portrayed a sharp distinction between the *pura* (city) and the *janapada* (countryside) to reinforce the uniqueness and grandness of the city. This distinction manifested in various ways – the city and its ethos encouraged questioning of established norms and symbols, brought together people from various social strata together to live in close vicinity rather than segregated and separated spaces. It was perhaps because of this heterogeneity that we find a number of texts being extremely cautious of, and sometimes even disdainful of the city. For example, the *Apastamba Dharmasutra* laid down that the study of the *Vedas* should be avoided in towns. It also urged the *snataka* (someone who had completed his studies as a *brahmacharin*) to not enter the town regularly.

On the other hand we find the Buddha and his fraternity of monks and even their lay supporters being extremely accustomed to the new ways of the city. Among the information gleaned from Buddhist sources, we also know that the city and the countryside did not present a simple dichotomy. Instead, human habitation was oft described in a sense of a continuum, often expressed through the hierarchical expression *grama*, *nigama*, *nagara*. Here the *grama* was the countryside or the village, the *nigama* was a market town, often associated with commercial activities, and the *nagara* was the city.

A graded hierarchy existed among cities as well. So for example, *pura* meant a town or a city, often associated with fortifications. There were also fortified capitals in every kingdom, called *Durga*, which are described as a planned royal city. The *durga* was also connected to the rest of the country through royal highways called *rajamarga*. We often also come across the existence of *mahanagaras*. The Buddha's devoted disciple Ananda spoke of *mahanagaras* like Champa, Rajagrha, Shravasti, Saketa, Kaushambi and Benaras that were monumental and grand, fit enough to be the final resting place of the Buddha. Related to the *nigama* was the *putabhedana*, literally meaning a place where lids (*puta*) of the boxes of merchandise or goods were broken or opened (*bhedana*). Thus places like *nigama* and *putabhedana* were essentially exchange centres and local markets. Places described as such include Pataligrama, described by the Buddha in the *Mahaparinibbanasutta* as a *putabhedana*. Many of these exchange centres were often crossing-points on rivers, such as Sringaverapura. *Rajadhani* was a capital city, similar to the *durga*. The texts often refer to the walls, gates, and watch towers of cities and the hustle and bustle of urban life. Another word used for such grand cities was the *agganagara*. The *Mahaparinibbanasutta* recounting the Buddha's visit to Pataligrama, narrates that the Master was quite impressed by the *putabhedana* and rightly assessing its potential, prophesied that soon it would become an *agganagara*, a premier city. Historical literature thus gives glimpses of different types of urban centres.

#### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Match the name of the Mahajanapadas with the name of the capital:
  - i) Kashi
  - ii) Anga
  - iii) Vajji
  - iv) Vatsa
  - A) Vaishali
  - B) Varanasi
  - C) Kaushambi
  - D) Champa



- 2) Write ten lines on the kind of cities which are referred to in the contemporary literature.

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## 13.6 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN URBAN CENTERS

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As mentioned earlier, the city brought together people from different economic and social backgrounds. Buddhist sources for example speak appreciatively of distinctly urban occupations. We know of physicians (*vejja*, *bhisakka*), surgeons (*sallakata*), and scribes (*lekha*). Accounting (*ganana*) and money changing were other urban occupations. There were also a range of entertainers, known from both Sanskrit and Pali sources, like actors (*nata*), dancers (*nataka*), magicians (*sokajjayika*), acrobats (*langhika*), drummers (*kumbhathunika*), and women fortune-tellers (*ikkhanika*). Some of them performed in fairs known as *samajas*, apart from other occasions. The Buddhist sources in particular show particular affinity for the accomplished courtesan (*ganika*), Ambapali, to whom was credited the prosperity of Vaishali.

Both textual and archaeological evidences also indicate diversity in craft-production in the Ganga valley in this period. Some craft specialists may have lived in their own settlements on the margins of cities, supplying goods for an urban clientele. These included the vehicle maker (*yanakara*), ivory worker (*dantakara*), metal smith (*kammara*), goldsmith (*suvannakara*), silk weaver (*kosiyakara*), carpenter (*palaganda*), needle maker (*suchikara*), reed worker (*nalakara*), garland maker (*malakara*), and potter (*kumbhakara*). We will take a closer look at some of these professions in the next section.

The city emerged as the central seat of monarchical power. It was often portrayed as an ideal space, built along an ideal structuring of moral and social order; one in which the king was central. The descriptions in various texts also showed the king's household and retinue as extremely diverse, employing a number of people. These included a number of specialists such as soldiers of various kinds, foot soldiers, archers, members of cavalry, elephant corps, and charioteers. The king's staff also included ministers, governors (*rathhikas*), estate managers (*pettanikas*), the royal chamberlain (*thapati*), elephant trainers (*hattirohas*), policemen (*rajabhatas*), jailors (*bandhanagarikas*), slaves (*dasas and dasis*) and wage-workers (*kammakaras*). The latter two categories will be discussed in detail later in the Unit.

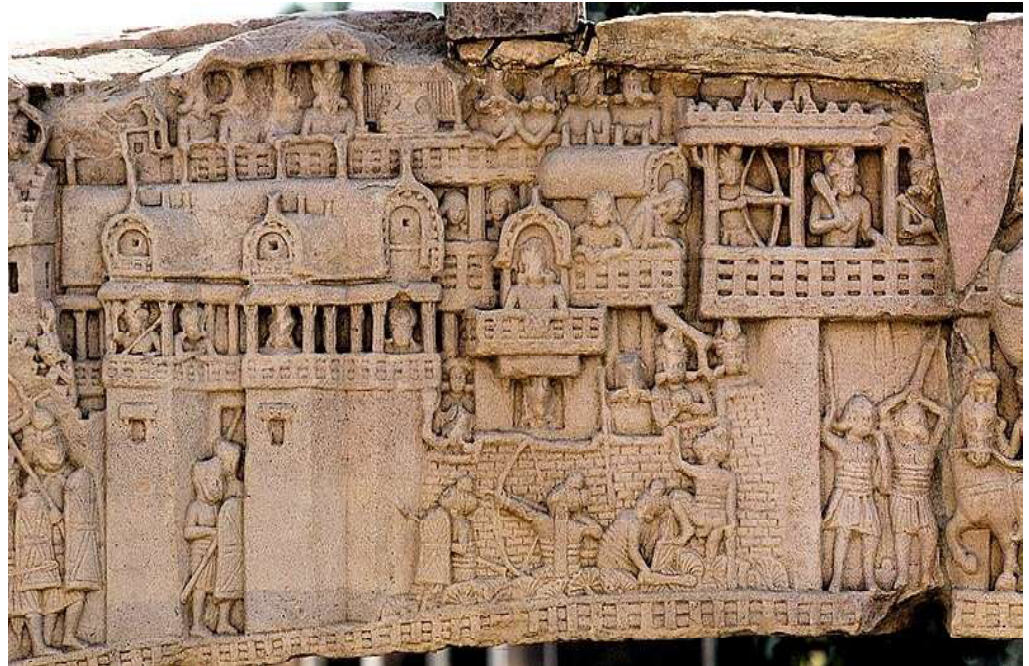


Fig. 13.3: City of Kushinagara in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE according to a 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE frieze in Sanchi Stupa's Southern Gate. Credit: AsitJain.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:City\\_of\\_Kushinagar\\_in\\_the\\_5th\\_century\\_BCE\\_according\\_to\\_a\\_1st\\_century\\_BCE\\_frieze\\_in\\_Sanchi\\_Stupa\\_1\\_Southern\\_Gate.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:City_of_Kushinagar_in_the_5th_century_BCE_according_to_a_1st_century_BCE_frieze_in_Sanchi_Stupa_1_Southern_Gate.jpg))

### 13.6.1 Trade and Traders

Such was the importance of trade in this period that we find Pali texts constantly referring to trade (*vanijja*) as an 'excellent profession' (*ukkattha kamma*); the only other professions given this honour were agriculture and cattle-rearing. The period of our study was thus associated with a steady and marked rise in trading activity. The most eloquent proof of the growth of trade during the age of the *mahajanapadas* is seen in the arrival of coins as a medium of exchange. Pali texts contain the first definite references to coins, e.g., *kahapana*, *nikkha*, *kamsa*, *pada*, *masaka*, and *kakanika* (Figure 13.4).

The literary evidence is corroborated by archaeological evidence. Punch-marked coins have been recovered from many sites. Most of them are made of silver. Metallic money brought in qualitative differences in exchange and introduced new occupations such as usury (money-lending). Pali texts contain many references to this profession, instruments of credit, people pawning their possessions, the occasional pledging of wife or children by debtors, and bankruptcy. Debtors were in fact debarred from joining the Buddhist *sangha* until they had paid their debts. The rapidly increasing trade made a range of material goods available for consumption. There were plenty of iron objects being traded, ranging from hoes, sickles and knives to hooks, nails, arrowheads, vessels and mirrors. Salt was mined in the Potwar Plateau in the north-west and may have travelled the long distance to the Ganges plain. Craftsmen and artisans in the towns produced textiles, beads, pottery, ivory objects, ceramics and glassware, and artefacts of other metals, all of which were items of trade (Thapar, 2002: 142).

Goods were also taken to the north-west, from where presumably horses were brought back; texts refer to the production of blankets and woollen goods in this

area which were intended for trade. In fact, there were two major trans-regional routes at that the time, known as the *Uttarapatha* and *Dakshinapatha*. The *Uttarapatha* was the major trans-regional trade route of northern India. It stretched from the north-west, across the Indo-Gangetic plains, up to the port of Tamralipti on the Bay of Bengal. The *Uttarapatha* had a northern and a southern sector. The northern sector ran through Lahore, Jalandhar, Saharanpur, along the Gangetic plains to Bijnor, and then through Gorakhpur, towards Bihar and Bengal. The southern sector connected Lahore, Raiwind, Bhatinda, Delhi, Hastinapura, Kanpur, Lucknow, Varanasi, and Prayagaraj, and then moved on towards Pataliputra and Rajagriha. The *Dakshinapatha* — the great southern trade route— is mentioned in the *Arthashastra* but was operational from the early historical period.



**Fig.13.4: Punch Marked Coins. Kosala Karshapana, c. 525-465 BCE. Credit: Classical Numismatic Group. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kosala\\_Karshapana.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kosala_Karshapana.jpg))**



**Fig.13.5: Silver Punch Marked Coin of Avanti Mahajanapada c. 400 BCE-312 BCE. Credit: Jean-Michel Moullec. Source: Bengali Wikipedia. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:I13\\_12karshapana\\_Avanti\\_1ar\\_\(8481304617\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:I13_12karshapana_Avanti_1ar_(8481304617).jpg))**

It stretched from Pataliputra in Magadha to Pratissthana on the Godavari, and was also connected to ports on the western coast. The physician Jivaka moved along the *Dakshinapatha* on his way to Avanti. The discovery of PGW in the Malwa region and NBPW in central India and the Deccan provide archaeological corroboration of this route.

The quantity of trade on these routes was on a grand scale. Buddhist texts talk of caravans with 1000 carts moving from one *janapada* to another, passing through deserted areas. We are told how caravans paid tolls and taxes to king's men, much like the modern toll-highways. In fact, Buddhist texts refer to special customs officials (*kammikas*) who levied taxes on merchandise and could even confiscate the goods of tax evaders (Singh, 2008: 289). Such rapid expansion of trade meant a diversification not just in the goods produced but also in the classes that produced and traded in them.

### 13.6.2 The New Investors: *Gahapati* and *Setthi*

Pali texts repeatedly use the word *gahapati* to denote a wealthy property-owner, particularly associated with land and agriculture. The *gahapati*, literally speaking, could also mean the head of the household. He was no ordinary person considering his vast amount of wealth. What was the basis of this large fortune? Pali texts often depict the *gahapati* as a peasant (*kassaka*) – but the *gahapati* was not an ordinary agriculturist. His holdings were so vast that he required and employed non-kin labour. Take for example the descriptions of Mendaka, in the *Dighanikaya*. In a story about the *gahapati* Mendaka, the text inadvertently gives a sense about the socio-economic and political bearings of the *gahapati*. Mendaka supposedly had lands so vast that he had employed slaves, servants and hired labourers (*dasakarmakaraporisa*). Along with paying them in kind, i.e., giving them food, Mendaka also paid them half-yearly wages. Mendaka had around 1200 cowherds (*go-palakas*), which meant he probably supplied milk commercially. Additionally, Mendaka is also seen as providing services to the king. He supplied provisions to the royal army. This shows the prestige and position of the *gahapatis* and the political clout that they enjoyed. Other texts also talk about the large amount of taxes paid by *gahapatis* that augmented the treasury. Such was the extent of the *gahapati*'s political importance that he was considered one of the seven treasures of the *chakkavatti* or ideal ruler of the world.

Pali texts speak positively about this new class of *gahapatis* as the latter patronized the *sangha*. In fact, the Buddhist canon included the *gahapatis* among the excellent social groups (*ukkatthakula*).

The *setthi* was a high-level businessman, associated with trade and money-lending. According to scholars, *setthis* combined the role of investors, financiers, and merchants. The *setthis* like the *gahapatis* were also important patrons of the new heterodox sects. There are many references to extremely wealthy *setthis* living prosperously in cities such as Rajagrha and Varanasi. The *Mahavagga* tells us about a *setthi-putta* (son of a *setthi*) named Sona Kolivisa. This young man was brought up in such luxurious surroundings that his soft, delicate feet bled when he took to the life of a barefoot monk. This led to his having second thoughts about the monastic way of life. The Buddha then solved the problem by allowing monks to wear shoes. The *setthi* of the Buddhist texts was a prominent and influential member of the urban community with access to and connections

with kings. The wealth and affluence of *setthis* and *setthi-gahapatis* can be gauged from the fact that along with kings, they figure among the clientele of the famous physician Jivaka and are described as paying thousands of *kahapanas* in medical bills.

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## 13.7 SOCIETY

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The expansion of agriculture and emergence of craftsmen required greater specialization. Occupations encouraged separate categories for craftsmen, cultivators and labourers. Each of these began to be treated as a separate *jati*. *Jati*, comes from the root *jata* meaning ‘birth’ and served a different function than *varna* (Thapar, 2002: 123). The *varnas* were associated with ritual status. The shudras were barred from participating in all rituals. On the other hand, the other three (brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas) were considered *dvija*, literally ‘twice-born’, i.e., they were entitled to the performance of *upanayana* ceremony which marked their ‘second birth’. Both *varnas* and *jatis* as social groups were required to regulate marriage within specific circles as well as follow occupations according to hereditary status.

What then was the difference between *varna* and *jati*?

For one, while the number of *varnas* was fixed at four, the number of *jatis* was numerous and kept growing with occupations and new regions and people being brought under the fold of the Brahmanical society. Similarly, the hierarchy of the *varnas* was also largely fixed, with the brahmana at the top and the shudra at the bottom. However the ranking of *jatis* was fluid across regions, based on factors like control over land, wealth, and political and military power.

Thirdly, although both groups were ideally supposed to be endogamous (i.e., marriage was supposed to take place within the group), certain inter-*varna* marriages were acceptable. For example, the *Dharmashastras* allowed anuloma marriages and frowned upon pratiloma marriages. The fact that such marriages were discussed in texts, even if negatively, suggests that these marriages did take place and *varnas* were not strictly endogamous. On the other hand, the *jatis* were more strictly endogamous.

Similarly the rules of commensality, the sharing and exchanging of food, were more clearly defined and practised among *jatis*. Amongst the *varnas*, certain situations allowed the acceptance of certain kinds of foods by higher *varnas* from the lower social groups.

Lastly, the *varnas* were associated with a range of occupations, whereas the *jatis* were associated with specific occupations.

Nevertheless both the systems were inter-related. For example, Pali texts refer to *ukkatta* (high) *jatis* performing high professions (*kamma*) and crafts (*sippa*) and similarly *hina* (low) *jatis* pursuing lower professions and crafts. The *ukkatta jatis* included *khattiya*, *brahmanas*, and *gahapatis*. These groups were associated with the ‘excellent’ professions mentioned above, i.e., agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade. In addition high-ranked crafts professions were those of a scribe (*lekha*), accountant (*ganana*), royal functionary (*rajaporisa*), etc. The inferior *hina jatis* included low-ranked professions such as that of basket makers (*vena jati*), washermen (*rajaka*), barber (*nahapita*), hunters (*nesada jati*), sweepers (*pukkusa jati*) and the *chandalas*.

The *Chandalas*, often called the fifth varna, were reduced to a status lower than the shudras. The Chandalas, who came to be treated as untouchable, appear to have been people on the edges of settlements, either forced there by encroaching settlers or requiring a habitat where they lived by hunting and food-gathering. Their occupations, such as weaving rush-mats and hunting, came to be looked upon as extremely low.

Another social group that had similar low status in society was that of slaves (*dasas* and *karmakaras*). The Buddhist canonical text *Digha Nikaya* states that a *dasa* is one who is not his own master and is dependent on another; he cannot go where he likes. The texts of this period refer variously to both male and female slaves. For example, the *Vinaya Pitaka* speaks of three kinds of slaves – the *antojatak*, who was the offspring of a woman slave, the *dhanakkito*, who was bought as a slave, and the *kara-mara-anito*, who was brought from another country and enslaved.

Since our literary sources by their very nature are elite, it becomes difficult as historians to reconstruct the lives, voices and ideas of these marginalised groups. The challenge is to use all source material available to us creatively and carefully, to fill the gaps in our ancient past.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1) Enlist the sixteen great states. Were there only monarchical kingdoms in these sixteen states? If not, which were these non-monarchical polities? Describe.

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- 2) What was the status of shudras and *dasas* in this period?

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- 3) Mark True or False

- a) Society in the urban centres was more fluid than in the villages and allowed people to branch out beyond their customary traditions and diversify professionally and personally.
- b) All the *janapadas* had equal power and status.

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## 13.8 SUMMARY

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In this Unit we studied the rise of states and cities, primarily in the Ganga valley. This period was marked by changes in the expansion of agriculture, beginning of commerce on a large scale and political strife between various polities. By the end of the sixth century BCE, four of the sixteen *mahajanapadas* had emerged as the most powerful states — Magadha, Kosala, Vatsa and Avanti, in addition to the powerful oligarchy of the Vrijjis. The relations among the states fluctuated over time, and included warfare, truce, military as well as marriage alliances. The battle for pre-eminence lasted a long period, with Magadha emerging as the final victor.

Social stratification and state formation gathered momentum and assumed significance in the sixth century BCE. The surplus generated was enough to sustain non-producing groups as well. These included traders, merchants, ruling class, brahmanas and monastic orders.

Linked with the growth of specialization of crafts was the development of trade. The age of barter was almost drawing to a close. Now the ordinary medium of exchange was a coin called *Kahapana* (*Karsapana*). It was of copper and silver and symbols were punched on it by merchants or ruler's guilds, guaranteeing its standard. The brisk exchange of money also brought in usury, the profession of money-lending, thus paving way for new social classes beyond the *varna* order.

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## 13.9 KEY WORDS

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<i>Anuloma</i>	:	Marriage between the man of a higher varna and woman of a lower varna.
<i>Gahapati</i>	:	Rich land-owners with vast estates; employed non-kin labour.
<i>Ganasanghas</i>	:	Non-monarchical polities in which power was exercised collectively, by a group of people.
<i>Janapadas</i>	:	Well-defined territories inhabited by people over whom ruled a political authority.
<i>Jati</i>	:	Occupational groups, different from <i>varna</i> . Each of these caste and sub-caste groups was associated with specific occupations. They were far too numerous to count.
<i>Mahajanapadas</i>	:	Larger and powerful <i>janapadas</i> whose rulers exercised greater territorial power.
<b>NBPW</b>	:	Northern Black Polished Ware. Dated to between 7 <sup>th</sup> century BCE-2/1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE.
<i>Pratiloma</i>	:	Marriage between woman of a higher varna and man of a lower varna.
<i>Setthis</i>	:	Entrepreneurs of trade, financiers, merchants.
<i>Urban center</i>	:	Area with greater density of population than the village, where non-agrarian activities are pursued; it could also be the seat of royal power, or an

important production and distribution centre of artisanal crafts and goods, or a nodal point along trading routes where traders congregated to buy and sell their goods in the market.

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## 13.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) i) B, ii) D, iii) A, iv) C.
- 2) In your answer you should explain various terms like *Pura*, *Durga*, *Nigama*, *Nagara*, used in the literature and point out their differences. See Sub-section 13.5.2.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 13.3
- 2) See Section 13.7
- 3) a) True  
b) False

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## 13.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Chakravarti, Ranabir (2016). *Exploring Early India up to c. AD 1300*. Third Edition, Delhi: Primus Books.

Jha, D.N. (2010). *Ancient India: In Historical Outline*. Revised and Enlarged Edition, Delhi: Manohar.

Kaul, Shonaleeka (2010). *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Sharma, R.S. (1983). *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*. Delhi: Macmillan Books.

Singh, Upinder (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Delhi: Pearson Longman.

Thapar, Romila (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. London: Penguin Books.



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# UNIT 14 ALEXANDER'S INVASION OF THE NORTHWEST\*

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## Structure

- 14.0 Objectives
- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Sources
- 14.3 Alexander of Macedonia
- 14.4 Arrian's *Indike*
- 14.5 Alexander's Successors and Seleucus Nicator
- 14.6 Impact of Alexander's Invasion
- 14.7 Summary
- 14.8 Key Words
- 14.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 14.10 Suggested Readings

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## 14.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, you will know about:

- Alexander's invasion of the north-western India;
- The different sources about Alexander and their significance;
- Alexander's battle with various principalities of India including Porus;
- Arrian's *Indike*;
- The impact of Alexander's invasion on India; and
- Megasthenes, who was a Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya's court.

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## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Unit you learnt about the *Janapadas* and *Mahajanapadas* which emerged in northern India in the sixth century BCE. In this unit we will focus on the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent and learn how it became a vibrant seat of activity due to events related to Alexander's invasion in the fourth century BCE.

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## 14.2 SOURCES

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The period of Alexander is well attested by a number of sources. At first instance, these sources seem impressive and remarkable. There are full length histories of the reign by Arrian and Curtius Rufus, a formal biography by Plutarch, a whole book of Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca*, and substantial passages in the later books of Strabo's *Geography*. However, despite giving an impression of being substantial, their value as primary sources is put to question as they are all late. For instance, Diodorus's works are dated to the third quarter of the first century

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BCE; Plutarch and Arrian in the second century CE. Thus, there is a gap of two to three centuries between Alexander's death and the first connected narratives of his reign. Some of these works are accused of being imaginatively fictitious, preoccupied with rhetoric, full of trivial details, grossly exaggerated, and are without checks to test their authenticity. Despite all these handicaps, scholars have been able to sift significant information that is both credible and useful in the context of India. Arrian's account is the most sober rendition of Alexander's reign. Arrian was a simple soldier who paid his tribute to the memory of Alexander by selecting the best possible sources and reproducing them faithfully. His seven-book '*History of Alexander*' was based on the accounts of Ptolemy, Aristobulus, Nearchus and Eratosthenes. Ptolemy, Aristobulus and Nearchus were all eyewitnesses to the campaigns of Alexander and were sometimes active participants. The companion work *Indike* deals with India and the voyage of Alexander's fleet in the Southern Ocean and is based on the sources such as Eratosthenes, Megasthenes and Nearchus.

#### **Some Prominent Classical Figures Associated with Alexander**

Quintus Curtius Rufus- (probably 1<sup>st</sup> century CE). He is the author of the only extant Latin monograph on Alexander the Great, usually called *Historiae Alexandri Magnii*, the liveliest account of Alexander's exploits in Asia.

Plutarch- Plutarches in Greek (born 46 CE), was a biographer and author whose works strongly influenced the evolution of history writing in Europe from 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Strabo- (Born 64 BCE). He was a Greek geographer and historian whose '*Geography*' is the only extant work covering the whole range of peoples and countries known to both Greeks and Romans during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE-114 CE)

Aristobulus of Cassandreia. He accompanied Alexander on his campaigns. He served throughout as an architect and military engineer.

Diodorus Siculus- (1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE) Greek historian

Nearchus- (d. 312 BCE). He was officer in the Macedonian army under Alexander, who on Alexander's orders, sailed from the Hydaspes river in western India to the Persian Gulf and up the Euphrates to Babylon.

Eratosthenes- Full name- Eratosthenes of Cyrene (b. 276 BCE) was a Greek scientific writer, astronomer and poet.

### **14.3 ALEXANDER OF MACEDONIA**

In the sixth century BCE, India's northwest was a site of conflict between various principalities. Kambojas, Gandharas and Madras fought with each other. Since there was an absence of an overarching powerful kingdom, the principalities of the north-west could not be organized into one kingdom. Due to its political disunity, the Achaemenian kings of Persia were attracted to this region. In 516 BCE, the Achaemenian ruler Darius invaded the north-west and annexed Punjab, west of the Indus, and Sindh. At this time Iran had a total of 28 *satrapies* of which India's northwest constituted the twentieth province. The Indian *satrapy* included the Sindh, the north-west frontier and part of the Punjab that lay to the west of the Indus. It paid a hefty tribute in gold which accounted for one-third of

the total revenue Iran received from its Asian provinces. Indian provinces provided mercenaries for the Persian armies fighting against the Greeks in the fifth century BCE. This part of the Indian territory continued to be a part of the Iranian empire till Alexander invaded it in 330 BCE.

Iranian invasions paved for the development of cultural exchanges between Iran and the northwest. A new script was introduced by the Iranian scribes called the Kharoshthi script. It was written from right to left like the Arabic. It was derived from Aramaic, then current in the Achaemenid empire. Trade also existed between the two regions as corroborated by the finds of Persian type of coins in the North West Frontier Province.

### **Macedonia**

There was a distinction in the ancient Greek world between those who lived south of the Mount Olympus and those who lived to its north. The people who lived to the north of the mountains were called the Macedonians. The latter were called 'Makedones', a Greek word in origin. As late as by the end of the fourth century BCE, the Greeks referred to them as 'Barbarians' indicating that they did not see them as Greeks.

Macedonia is sometimes called Macedon. It was an ethnically mixed region in the ancient past, surrounded by Greek states to the south and tribal kingdoms in other directions. In the north and the west, the mountainous terrain of the Balkans defined the landscape, while the southern region was fertile alluvium. Both these regions were mired in conflict with each other and it was Philip, the father of Alexander, who united the territories for the first time. In the fourth century BCE, Macedonians and Greeks were engaged in ethnic rivalry. The two people were distinct and separate. It was Philip II who consolidated his control over the Greeks in 337 BCE. Though Alexander mistakenly is referred to as a Greek, he was not! He was always wary of the Greeks. The Greeks were more sophisticated than the Macedonians and did not share the same cultural heritage.

Alexander was born in July 356 BCE. He was the son of Philip II, the ruler of Macedonia. By 337 BCE Philip II had consolidated his control over the Greeks by creating a union of Greek states called the League of the Corinth. The Union was bound together under the hegemony of the Macedonian king and owed allegiance to the League. Among his many exploits, his campaigns in Persia are noteworthy. Philip announced his intention to invade Persia in order to avenge on behalf of the Athenians for having faced sufferings and destruction to their temples during the Persian war and to liberate the Greek cities of Asia Minor. He was assassinated in 336 BCE. Upon his death the Greek states revolted from the Macedonian rule. These were suppressed by Alexander after his accession. Alexander invaded Persia in 334 BCE with a mighty army and defeated king Darius of Persia.

A. K. Narain citing Tarn's work says that since India was part of the Iranian empire, Alexander's interest in India was the inevitable result of his completion of his conquest of the Persian Empire. However, Arrian says that Alexander was more ambitious than that and he harboured a zeal to conquer India. Had it not been so, he would not have crossed the Indus as the Indus river was the boundary between India and Ariana (a possession of Persia). Ariana was situated to the

west of India and at this time was under the possession of Persians. River Indus was the eastern most boundary of Darius I's empire.

Among his many victories, Alexander's campaigns in India are the most noteworthy. In 327 BCE, Alexander marched from Bactra through the Hindukush and advanced towards the plains of the Indus. One section of his advancing force secured the communication route of the Hindukush and the other section under his own control entered Swat. He subjugated Swat after fighting fierce battles with the people of these mountain tracts. In 326 BCE, the two forces met at the Indus and after crossing the Indus he marched to Taxila. The political condition in the north-west was suitable for Alexander as it was divided into small independent monarchies and tribal republics. Among the more famous was Porus, who ruled a kingdom between the Jhelum and the Chenab. The communication between Porus and Alexander when they met has become legendary. Coming back to the Indus, Alexander crossed it and was met by Ambhi, the prince of Taxila. Both Ambhi and Porus together could have defeated



Map 14.1: Conquests of Alexander in India. Credit: The Loeb Classical Library, Arrian Anabasis of Alexander'. Source: Wikimedia Commons

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander\\_Conquests\\_In\\_India.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_Conquests_In_India.jpg)

Alexander but they could not put up a joint front. Ambhi did not oppose Alexander and welcomed him with lavish gifts. Alexander decided to leave his kingdom in peace but appointed Phillipus as a *Satrap* and left a garrison there. Alexander was keen to meet Porus who had refused to submit to him and proceeded to Jhelum (Hydaspes). The weather conditions were very unfavourable as the entire region was covered under snow. He faced great adversity but managed to cross the Jhelum and mounted an attack on Porus' army which was stationed at the opposite bank.



**Fig.14.1: 'Alexander and Porus'. A Painting by Charles Le Brun Depicting Alexander and Porus (Puru) during the Battle of Hydaspes. Credit: <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/le-brun/>, Source: Wikimedia Commons**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le\\_Brun,\\_Alexander\\_and\\_Porus.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_Brun,_Alexander_and_Porus.jpg)

Porus was wounded and retreated (Figure 14.1). Alexander was very impressed by his military prowess and persona and decided to reinstate Porus who then became his ally. Alexander's victory was momentous, and he celebrated it by the founding of two cities-Nicaea and Bucephala (Map 14.1). The latter was founded after his horse Bucephalus who had died due to exhaustion following the battle. Alexander also issued a commemorative coinage at a mint in Babylon (Figure 14.2).



**Fig.14.2: Victory Coin of Alexander the Great minted in Babylon in c. 322 BCE, following his Campaigns in the Indian Subcontinent. Obverse: Alexander being Crowned by Nike. Reverse: Alexander attacking King Porus on his Elephant. Silver. Credit: British Museum. Source: Wikipedia Commons.**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander\\_victory\\_coin\\_Babylon\\_silver\\_c\\_322\\_BCE.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_victory_coin_Babylon_silver_c_322_BCE.jpg)

Alexander continued his march into the Indian subcontinent and crossed the Chenab and Ravi (Acesines and Hydraotes). He defeated many principalities and fought a fierce battle with the Kathas of Panjab. The Kathas did not submit easily and fought valiantly. Alexander was able to capture Sagala, the hill fortress of Kathas and razed it to ground. Thereafter he was informed by a nearby king about the might of the Nandas, east of Beas. His information was corroborated by Porus too. Alexander wanted to proceed but his troops refused to advance (Figure 14.3).



Fig. 14.3: Alexander's Troops Beg to Return Home from India. Plate 3 of 11 by Antonio Tempesta of Florence, 1608. Credit: "alexanderstomb.com". Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander\\_troops\\_beg\\_to\\_return\\_home\\_from\\_India.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_troops_beg_to_return_home_from_India.jpg))

Hence, he was forced to return to Jhelum. He handed all the country between Jhelum and Beas to Porus and sailed down Jhelum for his return journey. Below the confluence of Jhelum and the Chenab, he fought his last important campaign against the Malavas (Malloi). The republican states of Malavas and Kshudrakas wished to form a confederacy against Alexander but the latter was successful in preventing Kshudrakas from joining with the Malavas. The Malavas fought bravely but were defeated. The Kshudrakas also could not stand anywhere before Alexander.

It is believed that during the last days of Alexander in Babylon, Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya along with Porus attempted to unify the Punjab. Later the Mauryas established themselves by bringing a major onslaught upon the Nandas of the Ganga valley.

Three years after his campaigns in India, in 324 BCE, Alexander was back at Susa in Persia. In the following year he died at Babylon. Upon being asked at his death bed as whom his empire should be bequeathed to, he supposedly replied 'to the strongest'. Thereafter ensued a long series of struggles between his generals and governors for the control of his vast empire. The struggle among the Diadochi, the successors, was a prelude to the establishment of the Hellenistic suzerainty in the region. By 317 BCE, even the Greek outposts in India were given up.

## Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Write a note on the sources which have been used to reconstruct Alexander's invasion of India.

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- 2) Write a few lines about Alexander's invasion of the Northwest India.

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**Fig.14.4: Ptolemy Coin with Alexander, Wearing an Elephant Scalp, Symbol of his Conquests in South Asia. Credit: Marie-Lan Nguyen (2011). Source: Wikimedia Commons [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tetradrachm\\_Ptolemaeus\\_I\\_obverse\\_CdM\\_Paris\\_FGM2157.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tetradrachm_Ptolemaeus_I_obverse_CdM_Paris_FGM2157.jpg)**

### Arrian

Lucius Flavius Arrianus or Arrian, as he is usually called in the English language – was born in Nicomedia, one of the Greek towns in the Roman empire, between 85 and 90 CE. It is important to remember that all accounts about Alexander date from three centuries after the death of Alexander. All these accounts are based on now lost primary accounts which are flawed and biased to begin with. For the events between 334- 323 BC, scholars depend on Arrian's account.

Arrian was a commander of a large army in the service of the Roman Empire. He had literary leanings and authored texts on hunting, cavalry tactics and wrote the biography of Alexander. He claimed that for his work on

Alexander, he had relied on the most trustworthy of the primary sources viz. Ptolemy and Aristobulus, who were part of the Alexander's staff in his campaign to the east. He authored *Anabasis* ('Journey up country') of Alexander, which consisted of seven books. *Indike* (his book on India) was a shorter companion work of *Anabasis*.

*Source: Alexander the Great. Selections from Arrian, Diodorus, Plutarch and Quintus Curtius.* Edited by James Romm. Hackett Publishing Co. Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge

### 14.4 ARRIAN'S INDIKE

Arrian described himself as a philosopher, a statesman, a soldier and a historian. He is best known for the Asiatic expedition of Alexander; whose narrative is remarkable in accuracy and clarity. His work on India, *Indike*, is written in the Ionic dialect. It consists of three parts: the first part gives a general description of India, based chiefly on the accounts of India by Megasthenes and Eratosthenes. The second is an account of Nearchus' journey on the Indus and the third contains proofs showing that the southern parts of the world were not suited to habitation due to excessive heat.

The first part of *Indike* has been translated by J W Mc Crindle and is richly supplemented with notes regarding history, geography, archaeology and the identification of Greek proper names with Sanskrit originals.



Map 14.2: Asia in 323 BCE. The Nanda Empire in relation to Alexander's Empire and neighbours. Credit: Talessman at English Wikipedia. Source: Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia\\_323bc.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia_323bc.jpg))



Based on the accounts of Megasthenes and Nearchus, Arrian manages to weave succinct and interesting details about India. He begins by describing the boundaries of 'India Proper' which he tells lies to the east of the Indus. He delineates the boundary of the lands of India by mentioning Hindukush in the north, river Indus in the west and Pattala in the south. (Alexander Cunningham identifies Pattala with Nirankol or Haidarbad. The old name was Patasila. He says that Patala is the designation bestowed by the brahmanas on all the provinces in the west, in antithesis to Prasiaka [the eastern realm] in the Ganges land. For Patala is the mythological name in Sanskrit of the underworld and consequently of the land of the west)

Mc Crindle feels that the measurements given by Strabo are more accurate than those of Arrian. However, Cunningham remarks that Arrian's measurements are in close agreement with the actual size of the country and this is very remarkable as it shows that the Indians, even at that early date in their history, had a very accurate knowledge of the form and extent of their native land.

His account of the different tributaries of Indus and Ganges, tribes of India, castes of India has been borrowed from Megasthenes' description. Arrian writes much detail on rivers, mentions the barbarous Indians of old times, their dependence on nomadism; how Dionysos, the conqueror of India who came even before the mighty Alexander, taught the Indians agriculture, introduced them to the plough and laws.

Arrian also spends some time in describing Pataliputra which he calls 'the greatest city of Palimbothra'. (Alexander Cunningham says that Strabo and Pliny agree with Arrian in calling the people of Palibothra by the name Prasii which modern writers have referred to as the Sanskrit *Prachya* or 'eastern'. But Cunningham feels that *Prasii* is the Greek form of *Palasa* which is the actual and well-known name of Magadha, of which Palibothra was the capital)

Arrian writes about the absence of slavery in India, modes of hunting elephants, and of course of gold-digging ants which he himself is not sure about since Megasthenes' account of gold-digging ants was based on hearsay.

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## 14.5 ALEXANDER'S SUCCESSORS AND SELEUCUS NICATOR

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Alexander after his retreat from India and Persia did not organise his conquests in any systematic fashion. As part of his arrangements, most of the conquered states were restored to their rulers who accepted his authority. His territorial possessions were divided into three parts and placed under Greek governors. Soon destabilisation and anarchy marked the period. Successor kingdoms emerged under the various *satraps* and Macedonia lost its importance.

At Alexander's death, the number of *satrapies* was twenty. By 308 BCE they terminated all contacts with Macedonian kingdom and coalesced into three separate groupings under Antigonus, Seleucus and Ptolemy. Seleucus Nicator was at the helm at the *satrapy* of Babylonia. After being thrown out of Babylon by Antigonus, Seleucus reclaimed it and was successful in expanding his dominions right down to the Indus, placing all the eastern *satraps* under his sway. In the meantime, Chandragupta Maurya was busy capturing the Ganga

plains. He proceeded to the north-west to exploit the power vacuum created by Alexander's departure. Once he reached the Indus, he came face to face with Seleucus Nicator, who had a stronghold in that region. The battle between the two was won by Chandragupta as evident from the terms of the treaty of 303 BCE. The Seleucid territories of eastern Afghanistan, Makran and Baluchistan were ceded to Chandragupta. In return Seleucus obtained 500 elephants. Seleucus also gave his daughter in marriage to Chandragupta. With this victory, the routes and important regions of northwest region came under Mauryan control.

Friendly relations seem to have been established between Sandracottos, as Chandragupta was referred to by the Greeks, and the Seleucids. Seleucus's envoy Megasthenes spent time at the court of Chandragupta and left an account entitled *Indica*. The original account is lost, and paraphrases of this text are preserved in the writings of later writers such as Diodorus, Strabo and Arrian. Friendly relations were carefully cultivated between the two. Several Greek ambassadors visited the court such as Megasthenes, Daimachos, Hegesandros.

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## 14.6 IMPACT OF ALEXANDER'S INVASION

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As mentioned earlier, Alexander's campaigns in India were not as significant as Alexander would want to believe. In fact, R. K. Mukherjee believes that Alexander's campaigns in India were not an example of brilliant military achievement as he did not come face to face with any powerful Indian monarch. The effects of his campaigns were at best indirect. According to A.K. Narain, the people of the northwest realized that small states and principalities were no match to the disciplined and organized campaigns of Alexander. Chandragupta was quick to realise the importance of erecting a huge empire. He went about to unite the whole of Punjab and later, northern India after overthrowing the Nandas. He not only added the southern states but also integrated the four *satrapies* of Aria, Arachosia, Gedrosia and Paropamisadae which were ceded by Seleucus to Chandragupta after the demise of Alexander.

Friendly contacts were maintained between the Greeks and Indians. According to a Greek writer, Athenaeus, an Indian ruler Amitrochates wrote to Antiochus I of Syria to send him sweet wine, figs and a sophist to which the Syrian king replied that he would happily send sweet wine and figs, but a sophist cannot be sold in Greece. Stabo refers to the sending of Deimachus to the court of Allitrochades, son of Sandrokkottos; Pliny mentions another envoy, Dionysius, from Ptolemy II of Egypt. Besides this, Ashoka also maintained close relations with the *yavanas* of West Asia and Egypt. His thirteenth rock edict, the version of which has been found in Greek at Kandahar, refers to his *Dhammavijaya* in the kingdoms of Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy Philadelphus II of Egypt, Antigonus Gomatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of Corinth. Ashoka is also supposed to have arranged for the medical treatment of cattle and men in the kingdom of Antiochus II and his neighbours. Not only does his description of himself as *Devanampiya Piyadassi* reflect the practice of deification current among Greek kings in the Hellenic west, but also the style of his edicts were influenced by the edicts of Darius. Kautilya and Megasthenes both refer to a state department looking after the welfare of the foreigners who were mostly *Yavanas* and Persians. Taxila, Sarnath, Basarh and Patna have yielded terracotta motifs with distinct Hellenistic influence.

Alexander's invasion also allowed for the establishment of Greek paramouncy in Bactria, and in the regions that are called today as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some forty-one rulers of *Yavana* descent are known from coins. Strabo refers to these kings as someone who subdued large number of tribes, more than that by Alexander. Menander and Demetrius, son of Euthydemus, the king of Bactrians, were the most notable. The Indo Greek kings were equally influenced by Indian religion and culture. Many of their coins carried Indian legends. An inhabitant of Taxila, Heliodorus, son of Dion, was an envoy from the court of Antialcidas, an Indo-Greek king, to the court of Indian king Bhagabhadra. The details are known from the Heliodorius Besnagar Inscription (Besnagar near Bhilsa in Madhya Pradesh), which mentions that he was a follower of the Bhagawat sect of Hinduism. Some of the coins of Menander carry the image of wheel which scholars believe is the Buddhist emblem of *Dharmachakra*, the wheel of righteousness.

Alexander's campaigns in the north-west India brought this part of the world in direct contact with the Greek world. Land and routes by sea opened up through which Greek merchants and craftsmen came to have access to these faraway lands. Greek settlements were established in this region for example, Alexandria in the Kabul region, Boukephala on the Jhelum, Alexandria in Sindh. Alexander also initiated geographical explorations of the harbours and coast from the mouth of the Indus to that of Euphrates. His historians have left valuable information of geographical merit. Besides providing a corrective to Indian chronology, Greek accounts tell us about Indian practices such as the *sati*, sale of girls in the market place by poor parents and good breed of oxen. In fact, some 2, 00,000 oxen were sent from India by Alexander to Macedonia. The Greeks also found that Indians excelled at the art of carpentry and they built chariots, boats and ships.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1) Write a few lines about Arrian's *Indike*.

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- 2) What was the impact of Alexander's invasion on India?

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**14.7 SUMMARY**

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In this Unit, we learnt that India's northwest was a region which attracted the attention of invaders quite early in Indian history. After the Achaemenid invasions, Alexander conquered the principalities and kingdoms of the north-western India.

He was successful in subjugating the Indian powers despite the valiant struggle that was put against him. He was able to cross Hydaspes (Jhelum) at night and met Porus who was defeated but was so impressed by his valour that he allowed Porus to retain his kingdom. Alexander was not able to go beyond Chenab and Ravi (Acesines, Hydraotes) as his troops refused to march any further. We also learnt that the Arrian's accounts are the main source of Alexander's campaigns. Arrian has left in his *Indike* some factual, some fanciful account of India which is based on the account of other travellers. Among Alexander's successors, the most notable was Seleucus Nicator who fought with Chandragupta Maurya but was defeated. He sent Megasthenes, a Greek Ambassador, to Mauryan king's court, who has left an interesting account of his reign in his *Indica*.

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## 14.8 KEY WORDS

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- Achaemenids** : Achaemenian dynasty who are also called Achaemenids. (Persian- Hakhamanishiya) (559-330 BC). Ancient Iranian dynasty whose kings founded and ruled the Achaemenid empire.
- Diadochi** : According to the English Oxford Dictionary, diadochi refers to the six generals of Alexander the Great- Antigonos, Antipater, Cassander, Lysimachus, Ptolemy, Seleucus among whom his empire was eventually divided after his death in 323 BCE. It is derived from the Greek word *diadokhoi*, meaning, 'successor'.
- Hellenistic** : Comes from the word 'Hellazein' which means 'to speak Greek or identify with the Greeks'. The word pertains to ancient Greece.
- Satrapy** : Governors of the provinces of the ancient Persian empire.
- Yavanas** : In early Indian literature refers to either a Greek or another foreigner.

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## 14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 14.2
- 2) See Section 14.3

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 14.4
- 2) See Section 14.6

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## 14.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## UNIT 15 RISE OF MAGADHA\*

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### Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Sources
- 15.3 Reasons for the Rise of Magadha
- 15.4 Political History of Pre-Mauryan Magadha
- 15.5 Magadha under the Mauryan Kings
- 15.6 Magadha at Ashoka's Death
- 15.7 Summary
- 15.8 Key Words
- 15.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 15.10 Suggested Readings

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### 15.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, we shall outline the territorial expansion of the kingdom of Magadha. This will provide an understanding of how and why it was possible for Magadha to become an 'empire'. In this Unit, you will learn about:

- some of the sources that historians use for writing on this period;
- the political history of Magadha during the two centuries preceding Mauryan rule;
- the early Mauryan kings – Chandragupta and Bindusara – and their expansionist activities;
- the context of the accession and coronation of Ashoka Maurya and the importance of the Kalinga War; and
- boundaries of the Magadhan 'empire' at the death of Ashoka.

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### 15.1 INTRODUCTION

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In Unit 13 you were introduced to the various *Janapadas* and *Mahajanapadas* that are known to us primarily from early Buddhist and Jaina texts. The rise of these *Janapadas* and *Mahajanapadas*, which were situated mostly north of the Vindhyas, is dated around the second half of the first millennium BCE. In this Unit we shall be discussing in detail the growth of one of these *Mahajanapadas*, namely Magadha.

Magadha has drawn the attention of historians for the last two hundred years. This is so because it had become the nucleus of the political power of the well-known Mauryan dynasty. The Magadhan kingdom began to grow during the sixth century BCE itself. However, this process accelerated considerably under the Nandas and the Mauryas. The location of Ashokan inscriptions indicate that a major part of the Indian sub-continent, excluding the eastern and southern

extremities, had come under Magadhan suzerainty. However, after discussing the details of how this expansion took place, we shall introduce you to the view that the composition and texture of the Magadhan empire, in its various parts, was so diverse that to be able to hold it together, direct political control was probably very difficult. This may perhaps explain why Ashoka endeavoured to resolve the inherent social tensions in the empire through the introduction of his policy of Dhamma (You will learn more about it in Unit 17).

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## 15.2 SOURCES

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The events and traditions of the middle Ganga plains where Magadha was prominently located are well preserved in the early Buddhist and Jaina literature. Some of the texts of the Buddhist tradition are compiled as the *Tripitikas* and the *Jatakas*. Those pertaining to the early Jaina tradition are the *Acharanga Sutra* and *Sutrakritanga* which are considered earlier than the others. All these were however written or compiled well after the sixth century BCE at different times. For particularly the early events of a political nature, Buddhist and Jaina traditions present them more authentically and directly than do the later Brahmanical accounts of the various *Puranas* which attempt to provide histories of royal dynasties to the period of the Guptas. Later Buddhist chronicles like the *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa* compiled in Sri Lanka are significant sources for the events related particularly to Ashoka Maurya's reign. These, along with the *Divyavadana* (which is preserved outside India in the Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist sources) not being contemporary to the period under discussion, have to be used cautiously as they developed in the context of Buddhism's spread outside India. Foreign sources of information which are considerably more relevant and are near-contemporary, are accounts gathered from Classical writings in Greek and Latin. These are impressions of travellers who visited India around that time, and the name of Megasthenes, who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya, is famous in this respect. Megasthenes is, however, known to us only through quotations in later Greek writings of Strabo and Diodorus of the first century BCE, and Arrian of the second century CE. Since north-west India from about the sixth century BCE till about the fourth century BCE was under the sphere of foreign rule some of the information on the phase of Achaemenian (Persian) rule and later, on the invasion of Alexander, comes to us from the Persian inscriptions and Greek sources like Herodotus' account.

Ever since its discovery in 1905, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya has been considered as an important source of information for the Mauryan period. Despite controversy regarding its date, many scholars would like to use a major portion of this text for the Mauryan period. They suggest that the text was originally written by Kautilya, the minister of Chandragupta, and commented upon and edited by other writers during a subsequent period.

Both, inscriptions and coins, are important sources of information for understanding the early history of India. They become significant during the Mauryan period. The coins of this period however do not bear names of kings, and they are called Punch-Marked coins because different symbols were punched on them separately. Though these types of coins are known from roughly about the fifth century BCE, the Mauryan punch-marked series are significant in that they were probably issued by a central authority as is indicated by the uniformity of the symbols used. In contrast to the coins, the inscriptional material, particularly

for Ashoka Maurya's rule is extremely important and unique in content. There are fourteen major rock edicts, seven minor rock edicts, seven pillar edicts and other inscriptions of Ashoka located at prominent places near towns and trade routes in various parts of the Indian sub-continent. They stand out markedly as a physical testimony to the length and breadth of the Magadhan empire at the close of Ashoka's reign.

Archaeology as a source of information has, in recent years, yielded considerable data on the material cultures of the Ganga valley. We know that the archaeological phase associated with the Northern Black Polished Ware was the period when cities and towns emerged, and during the Mauryan period, as archaeology suggests, there were further changes in the material life of the people. From archaeology we also know that many elements of material culture started spreading to areas outside the Ganga valley and that they came to be associated with Mauryan rule.

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### 15.3 REASONS FOR THE RISE OF MAGADHA

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You have been generally introduced to the kingdom of Magadha as one of the sixteen *mahajanapadas* in Unit 13. The *mahajanapadas* were located over a major part of the Ganga valley with a few to the north-west and south-west. However, of the four most powerful kingdoms, three – Kosala, the Vajji confederacy and Magadha — lay in the middle Ganga valley and the fourth, Avanti was in western Malwa. The kingdoms that surrounded Magadha were Anga in the east, the Vajji Confederacy to the north, to its immediate west the kingdom of Kashi and further west, the kingdom of Kosala.

Magadha can be identified with the modern districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda and parts of Shahabad in the present-day state of Bihar. Geographically, Magadha's location was such that it had in its vicinity large tracts of alluvial soil. The soil could be easily cleared off the heavy overgrowth with the use of iron implements and proved extremely fertile. Various varieties of paddy were grown as mentioned in the early Buddhist texts. This enabled the farmers to produce considerable surplus which augmented the taxes.

Magadha also had access to an easy supply of elephants. In fact, Magadha was one of the few which used elephants on a large scale in the wars and thus had an edge over others. The elephants could be procured from the east. Nandas, according to the Greek sources, maintained 6000 elephants. Elephants had an advantage over horses and chariots, because they could be used to march across marshy lands and areas which had no roads or other means of transport.

R. S. Sharma feels that the unorthodox character of the societal set up in Magadha allowed it to become more receptive to expansionist policies of its rulers. Magadha had a happy admixture of Vedic and non-Vedic people who were different in their outlook than those of orthodox Vedic societies.

Interestingly, the earliest capital of Magadha, Rajagriha (Girivraja) was situated to the south of the river and not near it. Rajagriha was surrounded by five hills and proved to be impregnable. It not only enjoyed a strategic location, but also lay in the vicinity of iron-encrusted outcrops. It has also been suggested that its accessibility to copper as well as to the forests of the present-day southern Bihar region can effectively explain why early Magadhan kings did not choose to have



their capital in the most fertile plains of the Ganges valley but in a comparatively isolated region. The capital of Magadha did, however, shift to Pataliputra (originally Pataligrama) situated on the confluence of several rivers like the Ganga, Gandak, Son and Poon Pun. The rivers could be used as communication routes by the army moving in the direction of north, west, south and east. Besides, being surrounded by rivers made its position impregnable, functioning as a veritable water fort (*jaladurga*). Pataliputra became the capital of Magadha under the Mauryas. This enabled Magadha to effectively command the *Uttarapatha* (northern route) which lay to the north of the river Ganges, along the foothills of the Himalayas. The river also came to be used as one of the main arteries connecting Magadha with different regions and making heavy transport along the river possible. Thus, Magadha had certain natural advantages over other contemporaneous kingdoms, though some of which like Avanti to its south-west, Kosala to its north-west and the Vajji Confederacy to its north were equally powerful at the turn of the sixth century BCE.

Recent researches have suggested that accessibility to the iron mining areas in particular enabled kingdoms like Magadha and Avanti to not only produce good weapons of warfare but also in other ways. It facilitated expansion of agrarian economy and thereby, the generation of substantial surplus, extracted by the State in the form of taxes. This in turn enabled them to expand and develop their territorial base. Avanti, it must be noted, became a serious competitor of Magadha for quite some time and was also located not far from the iron mines in eastern Madhya Pradesh. Avanti had defeated the Vatsas of Kaushambi and planned to invade Magadha. Ajatshatru, in response to this threat, began the fortification of Rajgir; the remains of the walls can be still seen. Invasion, though, did not take place finally.

Magadha was located in a region which had abundance of timber. Megasthenes has remarked about the wooden walls and houses of Magadha. Remains of wooden palisades of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE have been discovered to the south of Patna. Timber could be easily used to manufacture boats through which the Magadhan army could advance towards the east and the west.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Describe the important sources for reconstructing the history of Magadha in about ten lines.

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- 2) List three important factors which were advantageous for the growth of the Magadhan Kingdom.

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## 15.4 POLITICAL HISTORY OF PRE-MAURYAN MAGADHA

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Under Bimbisara, who was a contemporary of the Buddha and who, like the Buddha, lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Magadha emerged as a controller of the middle Ganga plains. According to Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita*, Bimbisara belonged to the Haryanka dynasty. He is considered to be the first important ruler of Magadha. With political foresight he realised the importance of establishing dynastic relations through marriage with the royal house of Kosala. Through this alliance he acquired a village in Kashi as dowry. He had cordial relations with the king of Gandhara. To the east of Magadha lay the kingdom of Anga whose capital Champa was an important commercial centre as a river port.

Bimbisara is reported to have ruled over 80,000 villages. Tradition tells us that Bimbisara was imprisoned by his son Ajatashatru (prince Kunika) who is said to have starved him to death. This is reported to have taken place around 492 BCE. Internal troubles and the succession of Ajatashatru to the throne of Magadha did not change its fortune. In terms of expansionist policies, the new Magadhan king followed a decisively more aggressive policy. He gained complete control over Kashi and broke the earlier amicable relations with Kosala by attacking his maternal uncle and the king of Kosala, Prasenajit. The Vajji confederacy, a *ganasangha*, that lay to the north of the Ganga, was Ajatashatru's next target of attack. Its control could have given him access to river trade. The principalities represented two divergent political systems. This war was a lengthy one and tradition tells us that after a long period of sixteen years he was able to defeat the Vajjis only through deceit by sowing the seeds of dissension amongst them with the help of his minister, Vassakara. Magadha had achieved a superior military technology due to the use of two weapons, *mahashilakantaka* (a large sized catapult used for hurling rocks) and *rathamusala* (a chariot fitted with a mace which caused terrific destruction when driven through the enemy ranks).

Ajatashatru's invasion of the kingdom of Avanti, the strongest rival of Magadha at that time, did not materialise though preparations are said to have been made for it. However, during his reign Kashi and Vaishali (the capital of Vajji) *mahajanapadas* had been added to Magadha, making it the most powerful territorial power in the Ganga valley. Ajatashatru is said to have ruled from 492 BCE to 460 BCE. He was succeeded by Udayin (460-444 BCE). During Udayin's reign the Magadhan kingdom extended in the north to the Himalayan ranges and in the south to the Chhota Nagpur hills. He is said to have built a fort on the confluence of the Ganga and the Son. Despite the vastness of Magadha's territories, Udayin and the four kings who succeeded him were unable to effectively rule and the last of these is said to have been overthrown by the people of Magadha.

Shishunaga, a viceroy at Benaras, was placed on the throne in 413 BCE. The rule of the Shishunaga dynasty too was of short duration and gave way to the rule of the Nanda dynasty headed by the usurper Mahapadma Nanda. It was during the rule of the Nandas in Magadha and the Ganga plains as a whole that the invasion of Alexander took place in north-west India in 326 BCE, often considered the beginning of the historic period in India. The Nandas are therefore, often described as the first empire-builders of India. It must however be underlined that they did inherit a large kingdom of Magadha which they then extended to more distant frontiers.

In the later *Purana* writings, Mahapadma Nanda is described as the exterminator of all kshatriyas. It is further suggested that he overthrew all the contemporary ruling houses. The Greek classical writings describe the might of the Nanda empire when they tell us about their vast army which is said to have consisted of 20,000 cavalry, 200,000 infantry, 2000 chariots and 3000 elephants. We also have some indications that the Nandas had contacts with the Deccan and south India. Their control of some parts of Kalinga (modern Odisha) is indicated in the Hathigumpha inscription of king Kharavela, who ruled in Odisha from the middle of the first century BCE. Some very late inscriptions from the south Karnataka region also suggest that parts of the Deccan may have been included in the Magadhan empire under the Nandas. Most historians suggest that by the end of the reign of Mahapadma Nanda the first phase of the expansion and consolidation of the kingdom of Magadha had taken place. Taxes were regularly collected through regularly appointed officials indicating that taxes were given priority. One aspect of the consolidation of Magadha was the strengthening of the agrarian economy through the construction of canals and irrigation projects even as far as Kalinga (Odisha). This foreshadowed the later restructuring of the economy under the Mauryas who were able to resurrect an imperial structure based on an extensive agrarian economy.

That the north-west was still under various small chiefdoms is attested by the Greek writings describing Alexander's invasion of the Punjab around this time. It is clear, however, that there was no encounter between the kingdom of Magadha and the Greek conqueror.

The Nanda rule came to an end by 321 BCE. Nine Nanda kings are said to have ruled and by the end of their rule they had become very unpopular. Chandragupta Maurya took advantage of this situation to ascend the throne of Magadha. Despite all these dynastic changes, Magadha continued to remain the foremost kingdom in the Ganga valley. Deeper reasons for the success of Magadha lay in its advantageous geographical location, its access to the iron mines and the control it had come to exercise over important land and river trade routes all of which have been discussed earlier in the Unit.

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## **15.5 MAGADHA UNDER THE MAURYAN KINGS**

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It has been suggested by D.D. Kosambi that the most immediate and unexpected by-product of Alexander's invasion of the north-west was that it hastened the Mauryan conquest of the whole country. He has argued thus because since the tribes of Punjab had already been weakened, it was not difficult for the Magadhan army under Chandragupta to conquer the whole of Punjab. Most of the Gangetic valley was already under the control of Magadha. Both Indian and Classical sources agree that Chandragupta overthrew the last of the Nanda king and occupied his capital Pataliputra and this success is linked with his accession to the throne in around 321 BCE. As mentioned earlier, the political rise of Chandragupta was also linked with the invasion of Alexander in the north-west. According to Classical sources, Chandragupta is supposed to have even met Alexander and advised him to attack Magadha which was under the unpopular rule of the Nandas. Though this is difficult to verify, both Indian and Classical sources suggest that Alexander's retreat resulted in the creation of a vacuum, and, therefore, it was not difficult for Chandragupta to subdue the Greek garrisons left there. However, what is not clear is whether he did this after his accession to

the throne of Magadha or before it. Some scholars date his accession to 324 BCE while now it is generally accepted as 321 BCE.

According to Indian tradition Chandragupta was assisted by brahmin Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta in rise to power. It is further suggested on the basis of a play of the sixth century CE which in its description of the overthrow of the Nandas by Chandragupta, hints that at his accession to the throne at twenty-five years of age, he was in fact a weak ruler and the real ruler of the empire was Chanakya. The *Arthashastra* is attributed to Chanakya who is said to have been well-versed in not only the political principles of warfare and aggrandisement but was also deeply knowledgeable about the organization of the state and society to ensure that the empire did not collapse.

Though the caste affiliation of the Mauryas remains obscure, it is significant that the most important rulers of this dynasty turned to the heterodox sects later in their lives. On the other hand, the several sources that point to the role of the brahmana Kautilya as the advisor and the motivating force behind Chandragupta cannot be ignored. The *Puranas* even suggest that Chanakya had appointed Chandragupta as the king of the realm. One can perhaps suggest that the Mauryas rose to power in a society which was never very orthodox. In the north-west there had been considerable contact with foreigners and Magadha itself was looked down upon in orthodox Brahmanical tradition. Besides, it was considerably exposed to the ideas of the Buddha and Mahavira. It was thus amidst considerable turmoil, social and political, that Chandragupta was successful in ascending to the throne of Magadha.

Many historians, who understand the Mauryan State as an empire primarily in terms of its territorial extent, attribute great importance to the role Chandragupta Maurya played in ruthlessly stemming the tide of foreign interference in the north-west and suppressing indigenous rulers in west and south India. Source material on the exact nature of these military exploits is wanting and therefore, one has to reconstruct these details on the basis of accounts which are available for his successors who inherited this empire.

One of the first major achievements of Chandragupta Maurya on the military front was his contact with Seleucus Nikator who ruled over the area west of the Indus around 305 BCE. In the war that ensued Chandragupta is said to have turned out victorious and eventually, peace was established with this Greek viceroy by around 303 BCE. In return for 500 elephants Seleucus gave him eastern Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the area west of the Indus. The Satrapies thus called were Arachosia, Paropanisadae, Aria and Gedrosia. A marriage alliance was also concluded. Further, Seleucus sent an ambassador called Megasthenes who lived in the court of Chandragupta for many years. This achievement meant that the territorial foundation of the Mauryan empire had been firmly laid with the Indus and Gangetic plains well under Chandragupta's control. It is suggested by scholars that Chandragupta ultimately established his control not only in the north-west and the Ganges plains, but also in western India and the Deccan. The only parts left out of his empire were thus present-day Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of north-eastern India. Details of the conquests in different parts of India are lacking. The Greek writers simply mention that Chandragupta Maurya overran the whole country with an army of 600,000. The conquest and subjugation of Saurashtra or Kathiawar in the extreme west is attested in the Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman of the middle of the second century CE. This record refers to

Chandragupta's viceroy or governor, Pushyagupta, who is said to have constructed the famous Sudarshana lake. This further implies that Chandragupta had under control the Malwa region as well. With regard to his control over the Deccan too we have late sources. These are some medieval epigraphs informing us that Chandragupta had protected parts of Karnataka.

The Tamil writers of the *Sangam* texts of the early centuries CE make allusion to "Moriyar" which is said to refer to the Mauryas and their contact with the south, but this probably refers to the reign of Chandragupta's successor. Finally, the Jaina tradition informs us that Chandragupta having become a Jain abdicated the throne and went south with Bhadrabahu, the Jaina saint. At Sravana Belgola, the Jaina religious centre in south Karnataka, he spent the rest of his life and died in the orthodox Jaina way by slow starvation.

Bindusara, the son of Chandragupta, is said to have ascended the throne in 297 BCE. There is comparatively little known about him from either Indian or Classical sources. To the latter he is known as Amitrochates. They also inform us that he had contacts with the Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus I, whom he requested to send sweet wine, dried figs and a sophist.

In a very late source of the sixteenth century, in the work of the Buddhist monk Taranath of Tibet, we are told of Bindusara's war-like activities. He is said to have destroyed kings and nobles of about sixteen cities and reduced to submission all the territory between the eastern and western seas. The descriptions of early Tamil poets of the Mauryan chariots thundering across the land probably refer to his reign. Many scholars believe that since Ashoka is credited to have conquered only Kalinga, the extension of the Mauryan empire beyond the Tungabhadra must have been the work of his predecessors. It can therefore be suggested that it was probably in Bindusara's reign that the Mauryan control of the Deccan, and the Karnataka plateau in particular, was firmly entrenched. Though Bindusara is called "slayer of foes", his reign is not very well documented, and, therefore, the extent of his conquests can only be arrived at by looking at a map of the empire of Ashoka who conquered only Kalinga (Odisha). His religious leanings are said to have been towards the Ajivikas. Buddhist sources suggest the death of Bindusara around 273-272 BCE. After his death there was a struggle for succession among his sons for about four years. Ultimately, around 269-268 BCE Ashoka was crowned Bindusara's successor.

### *Ashoka Maurya*

Till about 1837 Ashoka Maurya was not a very well-known king. In that year James Prinsep deciphered a Brahmi inscription referring to a king called *Devanampiya Piyadassi* (Beloved of the Gods). This was compared with what was known from the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa* and then it could be established that the king of the inscription was indeed Ashoka Maurya. The fame of Ashoka is due to the fact that he turned away from war and tried to establish a system of rule based on the principle of *Dhamma*. Below, we discuss some relevant details of his early life, the Kalinga War and the extent of the Mauryan empire during his reign.

### *The Kalinga War*

During his father's reign Ashoka served as a Viceroy at Ujjain and also at Taxila. It is suggested that he was sent to Taxila for a special purpose, namely, to quell a

revolt. After being successful at Taxila, the Buddhist sources tell us, he was sent to Ujjain as viceroy. The events in his personal life here, like his marriage to a Vidisha merchant's daughter and the birth of their two children Mahinda and Sanghamita, are said to have had a great influence in turning Ashoka towards Buddhism. Many of the details about his early life come from the Buddhist chronicles, and, therefore, certain ambiguities in them cannot be denied.

About the accession of Ashoka, there are several versions, but there is some general agreement that he was in fact not the crown prince (*Yuvaraja*). Therefore, he was involved in a struggle against other princes before he ascended the throne. His portrayal as an extremely wicked king before his conversion to Buddhism is undoubtedly exaggerated in Buddhist accounts to enhance his piety as a Buddhist. It is necessary to point out that though Buddhism played a significant role in Ashoka's later life, one has to discount those versions that depict him as a fanatic or bigot. An idea of the king's personality and beliefs comes through more clearly from his many inscriptions in which his public and political role are both described. They also suggest that his conversion to Buddhism took place after the Kalinga war. Though Ashoka's predecessors had intruded into the Deccan and the south and perhaps conquered parts of it, Kalinga, i.e., the present-day state of Odisha, still had to be brought under Mauryan control. It was of strategic importance as it controlled routes to south India both by land and sea. Ashoka himself in Rock Edict XIII describes his conquest of Kalinga which is said to have taken place eight years after his consecration, around 260 BCE. In this war Kalinga was completely routed and 'One hundred thousand were slain, and many times that number died'. Though on the battlefield Ashoka was victorious, the inscription goes on to describe his remorse which then ultimately turned him towards *Dhamma*. A policy of conquest through war was given up and replaced by a policy of conquest through *Dhammavijaya*. This was meant to work both at the state and personal levels, and totally transformed the attitude of the king and his officials towards their subjects.

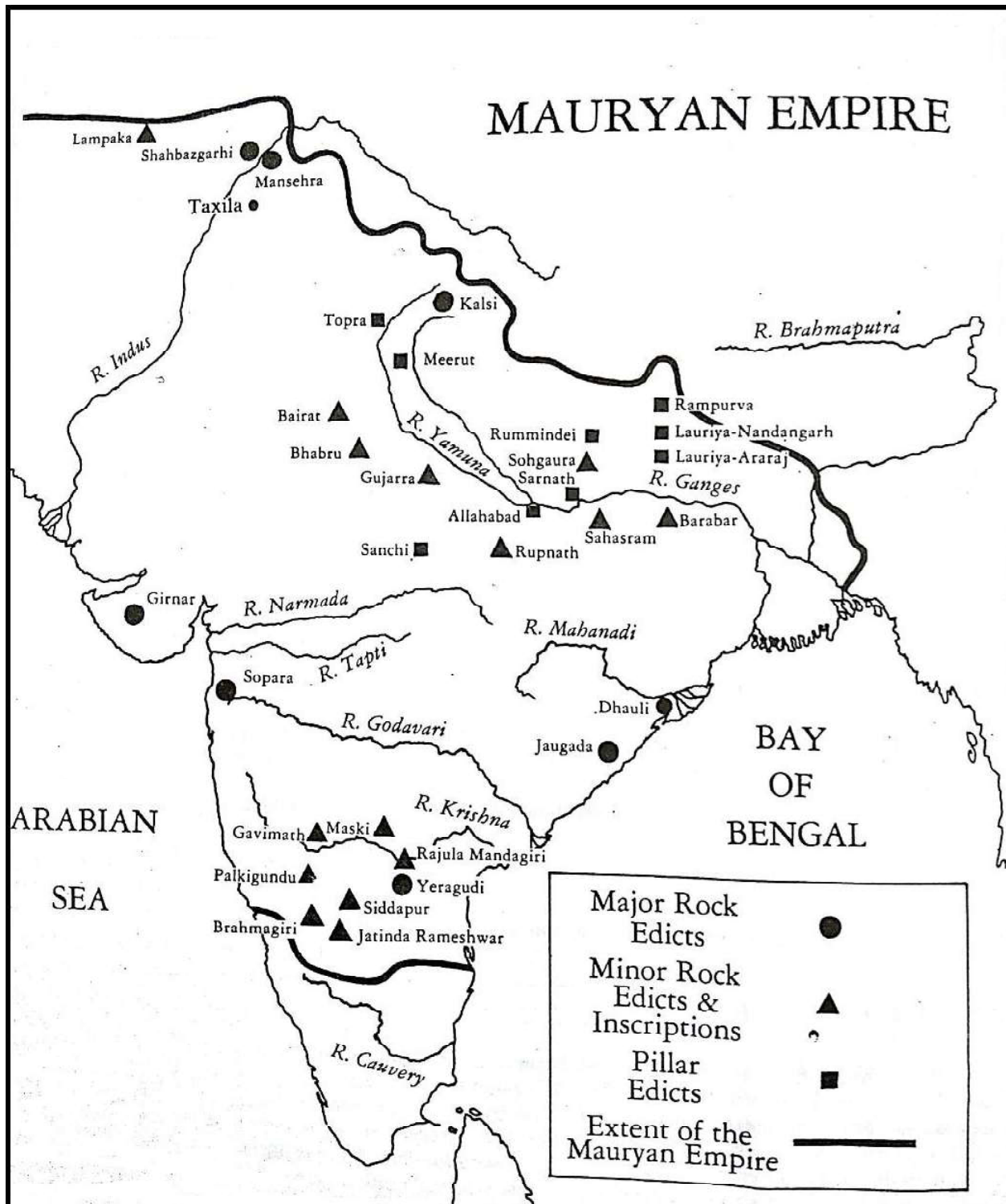
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## 15.6 MAGADHA AT ASHOKA'S DEATH

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The location of the various Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts through which Ashoka preached his policy of *Dhamma* gives us a fair idea of the extent of the Magadha empire during his reign. There are fourteen Major Rock Edicts, seven Pillar Edicts and some Minor Rock Inscriptions which give us this information. The Major Rock Edicts are located at Shahbazgarhi and Maneshra near Peshawar, Kalsi near Dehra Dun, Sopara in Thana district, Girnar near Junagarh in Kathiawar, Dhauli near Bhuvaneshwar and Jaugada in Gangam district of Odisha. In Karnataka, the Minor Rock Edicts appear among other places at Siddapura, Jatinga-Rarneshwara and Brahmagiri. Other Minor Rock Edicts are found at Rupnath near Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh; Sahasram in Bihar; Bairat near Jaipur in Rajasthan and Maski in Karnataka. The Pillars bearing Ashoka's inscriptions are found in Delhi (originally located at Topara near Ambala and Meerut), Kaushambi in Uttar Pradesh, Lauriya Araraj, Lauriya Nandangarh and Rampurva in Bihar; Sanchi, near Bhopal; Sarnath, near Benaras; and Rummindei in Nepal. The exact location of these sites is indicated in the Map 15.1 attached to this Unit and gives a clear idea of the large territorial spread of the empire under Ashoka. The placement of the edicts also highlights the care with which they were located on important trade routes linking river and road traffic. Therefore, as suggested by recent writings on the subject, access to raw materials appears to

have been the main motivation particularly in controlling the peninsula. The Edicts also describe people on the borders of the empire, and this confirms the delineation of the empire noted above. In the south are mentioned the Cholas, Pandyas, Sataputras and Keralaputras as people living outside the Mauryan empire. Inside the empire too there were people of diverse origins and diverse cultures. For example, in the north-west are mentioned the Kambojas and Yavanas.



Map 15.1: Mauryan Empire with the Location of Ashokan Edicts. Source: EHI-02, Block 5.

They are mentioned along with other peoples like the Bhojas, Pitinikas, Andhras and Pulindas who can be located in parts of western India and the Deccan. Apart from studying the locations of Ashoka’s edicts on a map, the exact extent of his

empire can be ascertained, to some extent by distinguishing the ‘conquest territories’ (*Vijita*) and ‘royal territories’ (*Rajavishaya*) from the bordering territories (*pratyanta*). Just as the territory of the Seleucid king Antiochus-II lay outside his empire in the north-west, so were the territories of the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Keralaputras and the Satyaputras, as also the island of Srilanka lay outside his empire in the south. In the east the empire of the Mauryas seems to have included north and south Bengal.

The Magadhan empire thus reached its greatest territorial expansion under Ashoka. However, simultaneously, there was also a conscious attempt to end all wars in his empire. Finally, though the find spots of the Mauryan inscriptions are on well known trade routes, some of them bordering peripheral zones of the empire, it still remains to be conclusively decided whether the regions where no evidence of inscriptions is found, were controlled in the same way as those where they were found. Both, the questions about the administrative control of the Mauryas and the policy of *Dhamma* shall be taken up for detailed study in Units 16 and 17.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

1) Write a few lines about the history of pre-Mauryan Magadha.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2) Mark which of the following statements is right (✓) or wrong (×):

- a) The *Uttarapatha* was a route that followed the course of the river Ganges. ( )
- b) Pataliputra was situated south of the river Ganges. ( )
- c) Megasthenes’ account of India is known to us through later writers. ( )
- d) On the advice of Chandragupta, Alexander invaded Magadha. ( )
- e) The Nanda and Maurya families were related by blood. ( )
- f) Chandragupta was able to defeat Seleucus Nicator. ( )

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**15.7 SUMMARY**

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In this Unit, we have attempted to introduce you to the way in which the first historical empire can be studied and also the details about the rise and territorial expansion of Magadha. It is hoped that after going through this Unit you have been able to learn : the importance of the strategic location of Magadha and factors responsible for its rise; the sources that can be used for writing about the political history of Magadha, in particular with Mauryan rule; the chief events in the early history of Magadha before the rise of Mauryan rule; details pertaining to the origin of the Mauryan family and their early history; the expansionist policies of Chandragupta Maurya and Bindusara; issues surrounding the accession of Ashoka Maurya and his activities up to the Kalinga war; and the extent of the Magadhan empire at the death of Ashoka.



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## 15.8 KEY WORDS

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<b>Aggrandizement</b>	: to increase the power of something.
<b>Autocratic</b>	: An absolute ruler whose authority is unchallenged.
<b>Benevolent Despotism</b>	: Good or benign ruler but who exerts absolute control.
<b>Chakravarti-Ksetra</b>	: The sphere of influence of a <i>Chakravarti</i> or universal emperor.
<b>Confederacy</b>	: League or alliance of states
<b>Contiguous</b>	: Adjacent or adjoining each other.
<b>Dhamma/Dharma</b>	: Literally ‘universal order’ but in its use in Ashokan inscriptions it is translated to mean ‘piety’.
<b>Satrapy/Satrapies</b>	: A term originally derived from an old Iranian institution, it referred to the provinces into which an empire was divided, and which were placed under the charge of <i>satraps</i> .
<b>Saptanga</b>	: Seven limbs or parts.
<b>Sophist</b>	: A philosopher, literally ‘one meant to deceive’.
<b>Surplus</b>	: Amount left over when all consumption requirements have been met. In an economic sense the difference between the value of goods produced and wages paid.
<b>Uttarapatha</b>	: Northern route usually referring to the land route running along the foothills of the Himalayas.
<b>Yojanas</b>	: Unit of measurement in ancient India.

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## 15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 15.2
- 2) See Section 15.3

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 15.4
- 2) a) x  
b) x  
c) ✓  
d) x  
e) x  
f) ✓

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## 15.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Basham, A.L. (1967). *The Wonder that was India*. New Delhi.

Bongard-Levin, G.M. (1985). *Mauryan India*. New Delhi.

Nilkantha Shastri, K.A. (1967) (Ed.). *Age of the Nandas and Mauryas*. Delhi.

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Thapar, Romila (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India. From the Origins to AD 1300*. Penguin Books.

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## UNIT 16 THE MAURYAN ‘EMPIRE’\*

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### Structure

- 16.0 Objectives
- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Sources for the Study of Mauryan Period
- 16.3 The Mauryan Dynasty: Origins and Expansion
  - 16.3.1 Chandragupta Maurya
  - 16.3.2 Bindusara
  - 16.3.3 Ashoka
- 16.4 The Making of an ‘Empire’
- 16.5 Economy
  - 16.5.1 Trade and Commerce
- 16.6 *Arthashastra* and the *Saptanga* Theory
- 16.7 Administration
  - 16.7.1 Central Administration
  - 16.7.2 District and Village Level Administration
- 16.8 Society
- 16.9 Summary
- 16.10 Key Words
- 16.11 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 16.12 Suggested Readings

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### 16.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the beginnings of the first pan-India polity, the Mauryas, and how they administered their vast realm;
- understand how different types of resources were required for sustaining an empire;
- understand the nature of urban economy;
- learn about the society, economy and political set up of the Mauryas.

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### 16.1 INTRODUCTION

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At the time of Alexander’s invasion of India, Magadha under the Nanda rule had emerged as the most formidable power. The ascendancy of Magadha reached its peak under the successors of Nandas, i.e., the Mauryas. The Mauryan empire marks a watershed juncture in Indian history. For the first time in the history of India, a large portion of the subcontinent, extending up to the far north-west, was under a single paramount power.

This Unit will introduce you to the Mauryan empire and its importance in history. The main focus in this Unit will be on the political, economic, and administrative

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## 16.2 SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF MAURYAN PERIOD

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This period has a greater number and more diverse type of primary sources as compared to the earlier periods; more importantly many of these sources are contemporary with the period under review. Let us look at a few of them in greater detail.

The most important literary source is Megasthenes' *Indica*. Megasthenes was a Seleukidian envoy who visited the Mauryan capital Pataliputra during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. His account, *Indica*, encapsulates his impressions of India, particularly northern India, under Chandragupta Maurya. However, the original work is lost. What is available instead are quotations, excerpts, summaries and quotes by later writers.

The other equally popular source is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Traditionally *Arthashastra* is ascribed to Kautilya, also known as Vishnugupta or Chanakya, who is believed to have been Chandragupta's chief minister. He helped him overthrow the Nandas. *Arthashastra* is a theoretical treatise, prescribing modes of statecraft, and not describing an actual state. A statistical study of *Arthashastra* reveals that some chapters could be dated to the first two centuries of the Common Era. However, many scholars consider it to be contemporaneous with the Mauryas. It reflects a complex administrative structure which was not achieved any time before the Mauryas.

The texts like the *Divyavadana* and the *Ashokavadana* as well as Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles such as the *Mahavamsa* and the *Dipavamsa* and the king-lists in *Puranas*, again of a later period, refer to Mauryas.

The most significant source for the Mauryan period is undoubtedly the inscriptions of Ashoka. Ashoka's inscriptions mark the beginning of Indian epigraphy. What sets Ashoka's edicts apart is that they are issued in first person, thereby revealing the voice and ideas of the king himself. The edicts are written in the Prakrit language and Brahmi script, and occasionally in the Kharoshti script (in the north-western parts of the subcontinent). There are a few inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic as well. A bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription was found at Shar-i-Kuna near Kandahar in south-east Afghanistan and one in Taxila. Ashoka himself had designated these edicts as *Dhammalipi* (Edicts of Piety) and they are of the following types (Map 16.1):

- 1) Fourteen Rock Edicts or Major Rock Edicts (REs)
- 2) Two 'Separate' Rock Edicts or 'Kalinga' Rock Edicts
- 3) Two Minor Rock Edicts (MREs)
- 4) Seven Pillar Edicts or Major Pillar Edicts (PEs)
- 5) Minor Pillar Edict (MPE)

- 6) Rock Edict from Bairat (Rajasthan)
- 7) Two Minor Pillar Inscriptions
- 8) Inscriptions engraved on the Barabar hills close to Gaya, Bihar.

The Major Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts occur at different places, with minor variations. The Minor Rock Edicts are considered among the earliest inscriptions, followed by the Major Rock Edicts. The Pillar Edicts are still later.

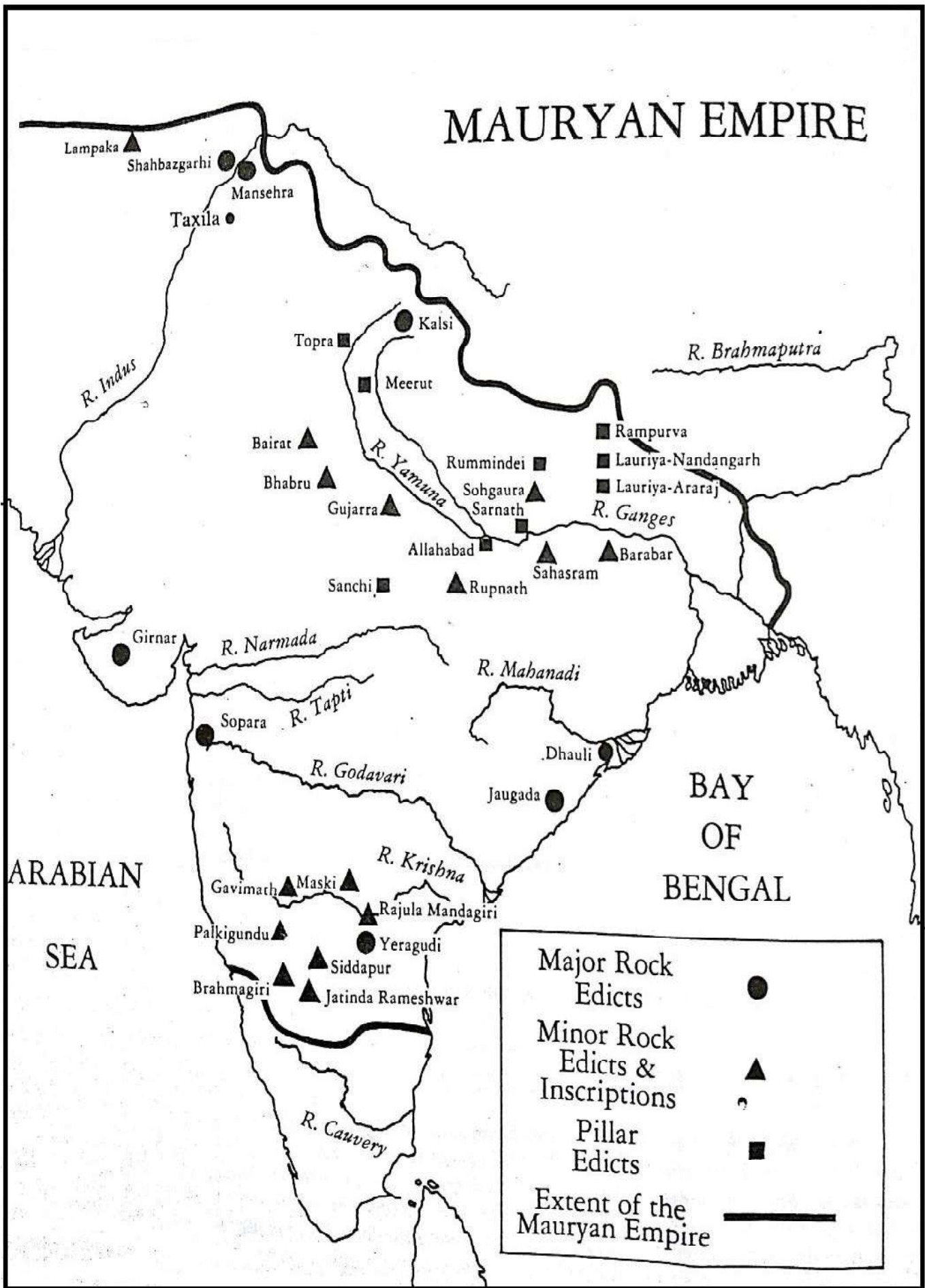


**Fig.16.1: Hoard of Mauryan Punch Marked Coins. Credit: CNG Coins.**

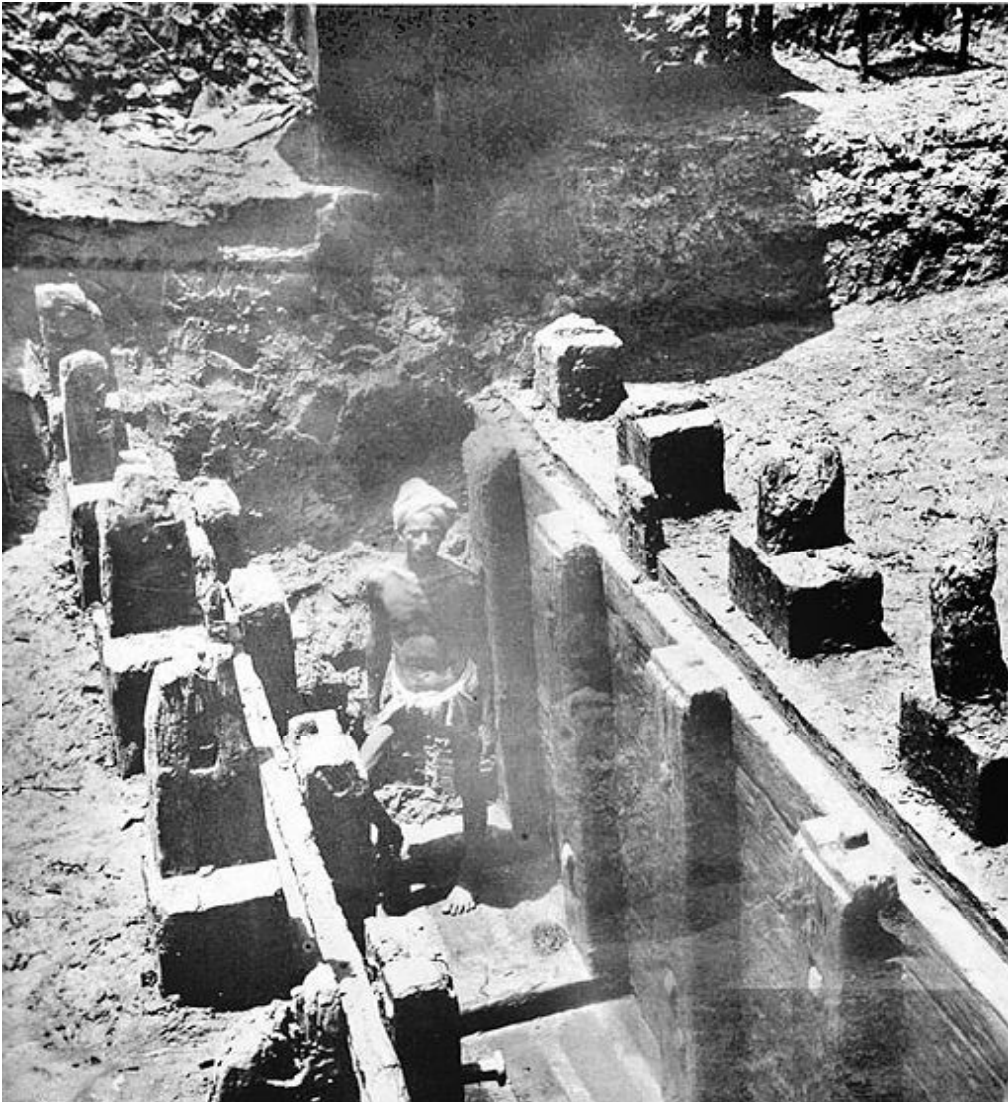
**Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punch-marked\\_coins#/media/File:Hoard\\_of\\_mostly\\_Mauryan\\_coins.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punch-marked_coins#/media/File:Hoard_of_mostly_Mauryan_coins.jpg))**

Other material sources for the study of the Maurya period include coins (Figure 16.1) and archaeological remains. Coins of this period are without legends. Punch-marked coins, mostly of silver, were issued during the Mauryan period. The punch marked coins of the Mauryas contain uniform symbols. Most probably, they were issued by the central authority. Known as *karshapana* coins, they do not specify the issuing authority; they do carry certain symbols that have been associated with Mauryan kings. These symbols include crescent-on-arches, tree-in-railing, and peacock-on-arches.

Archaeological remains from Bulandibagh (Figure 16.2) and Kumrahar (Figure 16.3) are associated with the Mauryan capital Pataliputra. Other important sites are Taxila, Mathura, and Bhita. What is a common feature of the finds is the great diversity of artefacts, and heightened urban elements. Thus, a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of the Mauryas rests on a combined analysis of the various sources.



Map 16.1: Location of Ashokan Inscriptions. Source: EHI-02, Block 5.



**Fig.16.2: Mauryan Remains of Wooden Palisade at Bulandibagh Site of Pataliputra. Archaeological photo at Pataliputra by ASIEC 1912-13. Source: Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan\\_remains\\_of\\_wooden\\_palissade\\_at\\_Bulandi\\_Bagh\\_site\\_of\\_Pataliputra\\_ASIEC\\_1912-13.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan_remains_of_wooden_palissade_at_Bulandi_Bagh_site_of_Pataliputra_ASIEC_1912-13.jpg))**



**Fig.16.3: Mauryan Ruins of Pillared Hall at Kumrahar of Pataliputra. Credit: 1912-13 Archaeological Excavation by ASIEC at Pataliputra. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan\\_ruins\\_of\\_pillared\\_hall\\_at\\_Kumrahar\\_site\\_of\\_Pataliputra\\_ASIEC\\_1912-13.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan_ruins_of_pillared_hall_at_Kumrahar_site_of_Pataliputra_ASIEC_1912-13.jpg))**

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## 16.3 THE MAURYAN DYNASTY: ORIGINS AND EXPANSION

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The foundation of the Mauryan empire was laid by Chandragupta Maurya, who overthrew the Nanda dynasty in 321/324 BCE. According to *Puranas*, the Mauryan rule lasted for 137 years, i.e., the Mauryas probably ruled till 187/185 BCE. Even if one takes these dates as approximate, one can conclude that the Mauryan period lasted from around the late fourth century BCE to the first quarter of the second century BCE.

### 16.3.1 Chandragupta Maurya

Details about Chandragupta's ancestry and caste status differ from text to text. The *Mudrarakshasa* describes him as being of low social origin. Dhundiraja, a commentator on the *Vishnu Purana*, states that Chandragupta was a Nanda scion, son of the Nanda king Sarvarthasiddhi with Mura, the daughter of a hunter. It is suggested that as the son of Mura, Chandragupta became known as Maurya, which went on to become the dynastic epithet. The 12<sup>th</sup> century text *Parishishta-parvan* written by Jaina author, Hemachandra, identifies Chandragupta as the grandson of the chief of peacock-tamers' clan (*mayura-poshakas*). Similarly, Greek accounts of Justin and Plutarch categorically state that Sandrocottus (i.e., Chandragupta) did not enjoy any royal descent. On the other hand, the Buddhist texts such as the *Digha Nikaya*, *Mahavamsa*, and *Divyavadana* trace the Mauryan ancestry to a *khattiya* (Pali for kshatriya) clan called the Moriyas, who ruled at Pipphalivana. This stress on his noble birth was to legitimize his ascension to the throne.



Fig.16.4: Bhadrabahu Cave, where Chandragupta Maurya is said to have died at Sravanabelgola, Karnataka. Credit: Amol Thikane. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhadrabahu\\_Gopha\\_on\\_Chandragiri.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhadrabahu_Gopha_on_Chandragiri.JPG)

What we do know from Greek accounts is that soon after Alexander's dispersal from India, Sandrocottus established a new dynasty and conquered a vast area. Greek sources also mention a treaty signed between Seleucus Nikator and



Chandragupta Maurya. According to the terms of this treaty, Seleucus ceded to Chandragupta the territories of Arachosia (the Kandahar area of south-east Afghanistan), Gedrosia (south Baluchistan), and Paropomisadai (area between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent). Chandragupta is said to have reciprocated by gifting 500 war elephants to Seleucus. Alongside the treaty, the general rights of intermarriage between the Greeks and the Indians was also acknowledged. Chandragupta not only established control over the north-west but also the Ganga plains, western India and the Deccan. Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of north-east India were out of this ambit.

Graeco-Roman sources also speak highly of the trans-Vidhyan military exploits of Sandracottus. Plutarch mentions that Sandracottus over-ran and subdued the whole of 'India' with an army of 600,000 men. However, it remains unclear what these writers exactly mean by 'India'.

Chandragupta's reign is supposed to have lasted nearly 24 years.

### 16.3.2 Bindusara

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara, who ruled between 297 and 273 BCE. The *Mahabhashya* refers to Chandragupta's successor as Amitraghata, which literary means 'a slayer of enemies'. On the other hand, Greek accounts such as those of Athenaios and Strabo knew him as Amitrokhates or Alitrokhates. These names were probably royal epithets, which further indicate his military prowess. To Bindusara's credit, he succeeded in keeping the vast empire he had inherited, intact. The *Divyavadana* speaks of a revolt in Taxila during Bindusara's reign. According to *Divyavadana* the subjects of Taxila were dissatisfied with rogue administrators (*dushtamatyas*; *amatyas* meaning ministers).



Silver Coin (Karsapana) of the period of Bindusara. Credit: Jean-Michel Moullec.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:142\\_1karshapana\\_Maurya\\_Bindusara\\_MACW4165\\_1ar\\_\(8486583162\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:142_1karshapana_Maurya_Bindusara_MACW4165_1ar_(8486583162).jpg))

Under Bindusara's reign, diplomatic relations with Greek rulers of West Asia continued. Bindusara is described as having requested the Syrian king, Antiochus I, to send him fine wine, figs and a sophist (philosopher). To this, Antiochus replied that while he would definitely send across the wine and figs, Greek laws do not permit the sale and purchase of sophists.

### 16.3.3 Ashoka

For a long time till 1837, not much was known about Ashoka. In that year James Prinsep deciphered a Brahmi inscription referring to a king called *Devanampiya*

*Piyadasi* (Beloved of the Gods). Further, study of *Mahavamsa* made it clear that this epithet referred to Ashoka Maurya.

Ashoka succeeded his father Bindusara upon his death in 273 BCE. The *Asokavadana* says that when he was born, his mother Subhadraangi exclaimed 'I am now without sorrow' and that is how he came to be named Ashoka (the one who is without sorrow). During his father's reign, he was appointed as the Viceroy of Taxila and also Ujjain. It is believed that he was not the crown prince (*yuvaraja*). He was engaged in a struggle with his brothers for the throne.

Ashoka, like Bindusara before him, inherited a large part of the subcontinent as empire. The only significant area not under his suzerainty was Kalinga (modern day Odisha). It was in 260 BCE that Kalinga was finally brought under Mauryan control as a result of a fierce campaign led by Ashoka. Strategically Kalinga was important. It was rich in forest resources and also lay on the Mauryan trade route with the peninsula through the east coast. However, the campaign itself was very destructive, with thousands killed, and many more captured as prisoners. The large-scale destruction is said to have filled king Ashoka with remorse. In Rock Edict XIII, Ashoka, however, states that such death and destruction is inevitable when an unconquered area is conquered. He wished that his successors would avoid any more bloodshed. Despite being remorseful, Ashoka issued a warning to the troublesome forest people, reminding them that even in his repentance, he still had the power to punish. It is also noteworthy that Ashoka refrained from engraving his remorse at any location in Kalinga, where the Rock Edict XIII was in fact replaced by the Separate Edicts. The Separate Edicts contain instructions to his officers and emphasize the value of good administration.



**Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, Bihar. Credit: Bpilgrim. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashoka\\_pillar\\_at\\_Vaishali,\\_Bihar,\\_India.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashoka_pillar_at_Vaishali,_Bihar,_India.jpg))**

The victory in Kalinga war marked the official replacement of the war-drum (*bherighosha*) with the sound of *Dhamma* (*dhammaghosha*). The remorse over the Kalinga war sparked his interest in Buddhism and started his journey of

conversion. It was not however an overnight conversion, as Ashoka's sympathy towards Buddhism had been brewing. He himself states in Minor Rock Edict I that he has been a lay devotee for two and a half years, indicating that he turned towards the Buddha's teaching only gradually and not suddenly.

The extent of Ashoka's empire can be traced through the spread of his inscriptions. From their distribution we know that the Mauryan Empire extended up to Kandahar in Afghanistan in the north-west. In the eastern frontier it extended to Odisha. According to Rock Edict XIII, the rest of the subcontinent was under Mauryan rule barring the extreme south, which was ruled by Cholas and Pandyas; and according to Rock Edict II by the Keralaputas and Satiyaputras. People of diverse origins and diverse cultures lived in his empire. For example, in the northwest are mentioned the Kambojas and Yavanas. They are mentioned along with other people like the Bhojas, Pitinikas, Andhras and Pulindas who can be located in parts of western India and the Deccan.

The Mauryan empire declined rapidly after Ashoka. The *Puranas* mention the names of later Mauryan rulers and make it clear that the duration of their reigns was relatively very short. The empire soon became weak and fragmented and is said to have suffered an invasion by the Bactrian Greeks. The Mauryan dynasty came to an end with the last king Brihadratha being killed by his own military commander Pushyamitra, who then established the Shunga dynasty in c. 187 BCE.

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## 16.4 THE MAKING OF AN 'EMPIRE'

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Traditional viewpoints saw the Mauryan empire as a centralized bureaucratic empire. Such empires are characterized by powerful kings who through military exploits bring peace and cohesiveness to the kingdom. They are marked by the presence of allies, enemies, matrimonial relations, diplomatic alliances. Centralized bureaucratic empires are exploitative in nature with corresponding element of inequality among social classes. Romila Thapar's earlier contention that the Mauryan empire was a uniform and centralized administered entity was modified by her in a later study. According to her, at the hub was the metropolitan state of Magadha, broadly an area of the distribution of the pillar edicts. This was the area of maximum centralized administration. Then there were the core areas, which were of strategic importance and agrarian and commercial potential. This second category was less under central control and was under the control of governors and senior officials. Gandhara, Raichur Doab, Southern Karnataka, Kalinga and Saurashtra were such core areas. The third category was those areas which were located at the peripheries. The economy of such regions was not restructured by the Mauryan State. Only the resources were tapped.

The Mauryan realm covered diverse ethnic groups, including the non-indigenous *yavanas*, as well as different linguist groups. This is corroborated from the fact that Ashoka's edicts are found in at least three languages, Prakrit, Greek and Aramaic. Ashoka's edicts also corroborate the presence of multiple religious beliefs and practices, including Buddhism, Jainism, Vedic and Brahmanical practices, Ajikivism and smaller cults.

The key difference between a kingdom and an empire is present in the fact that a kingdom draws maximum profit from existing resources. An empire on the other hand, makes considerable effort in restructuring resources to get maximum revenue. The financial needs of administering an empire are considerable. In the

Mauryan empire, this restructuring took place through the extension of agriculture, and introduction of wide-reaching commercial exchange (Thapar, 2002). Moreover, the governance of such a vast realm was aided through multiple foci of administration. Thus, regional variations and diversities were accommodated by the Mauryan rulers into their polity. While an empire accommodates and integrates these diversities on the one hand, at the same time, it also favours homogeneity as a binding force. Thus, imperial systems make attempts to draw together the ends of empire, to encourage foremost the movement of peoples and goods (Thapar, 2002). This includes the use of script, punch-marked coins in exchange transactions and the projection of a new ideology that sets new precepts. In the case of Mauryan empire, the State attempted cultural homogeneity through the introduction of the policy of *Dhamma*.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

- 1) What are the main sources for the reconstruction of the history of Mauryas?  
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- 2) Comment briefly on the notion of Mauryan ‘Empire’.  
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**16.5 ECONOMY**

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Since the time of sixth century BCE, there had been a continuous expansion of agriculture along with the rise in urban centers. The Greek writer Arrian talks about the immense number of towns. Technologically the Mauryan economy and state were on a sound footing. The *Arthashastra* mentions use of different kinds of iron. Iron was a crucially important metal for agriculture. Similarly, the social dimensions of production also had a strong basis. *Arthashastra* mentions that new lands should be brought under the plough and for this purpose the shudras were to be settled on these areas. The needs of labour for labour intensive tasks such as paddy cultivation were to be met with prisoners of war. It is believed that the 1,50,000 people who were deported after the Kalinga war were used in this fashion. The shudra settlers were given fiscal concessions along with seed and cattle to settle new lands. Such lands formed part of the *sita* lands or crown lands. Thus, two factors — control over iron and manpower — laid the foundations of a strong economy during the Mauryan period.

### 16.5.1 Trade and Commerce

The Magadha State was concerned about two things:

- a) Expansion of trade and commerce
- b) Establishment of new towns and markets.

The expansion of commerce and trade enabled the Mauryas to augment their resources and revenue. The *Jatakas* refer to caravan traders carrying large volumes of goods to distant places. The Mauryan State was able to provide security and peace and hence trade routes and trade became more secure. Major trade routes to West Asia and Central Asia passed through the north-west India. Major centers like Rajagriha in Magadha and Kaushambi near present-day Prayagaraj were located on main trade routes that were along the river Ganges and the Himalayan foothills. Pataliputra was located in a strategic location through which trade routes and river routes in all the four directions could be accessed. The northern route linked cities like Kapilavastu, Shravasthi, Vaishali with Kalsi, Hazara and eventually Peshawar. Megasthenes talks of a land route that connected the north-west with Pataliputra. The same land route in the south linked central India and in the south east, Kalinga. Then there was an eastern route. It turned southwards to finally reach Andhra and Karnataka. The other part of the eastern route continued down to the Ganges delta to Tamralipti which acted as an exit point to the south and south-east. From Kaushambi, moving westwards, was another route which led to Ujjain. This continued either further west to the coast of Gujarat or west south across the Narmada and was regarded as *Daksinapatha* (southern route). The overland route to regions of the west went via Taxila near Islamabad.

River transport had improved once the forests around the valleys had been cleared under state initiative. Other factors like the establishment of friendly relations with the Greeks under the Mauryan kings like Bindusara and Ashoka improved trade relations.

The artisans during the Mauryan period were organized along guild lines. The well-known guilds were those of metallurgists, carpenters, potters, leatherworkers, painters, textile workers etc. The Mauryan State also was very careful in making the organization of trade efficient. Though it did not directly interfere with guilds, it did take control of production and distribution in some cases. The State did this by directly employing some of the artisans like armourers, shipbuilders, stone builders etc. They were exempt from payment of taxes because they rendered compulsory labour services to the State. Other artisans like spinners, weavers, miners etc. who worked for the State were taxed.

Urbanism spread to other areas of western and central India, the Deccan and south India. *Gahapatis* became prosperous and rural settlements proliferated. Towns came to be inhabited by merchants, traders and officials. According to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the State founded towns through the process of *durganivesa* or *durgavidhana*. These towns were peopled by priests, nobles, soldiers, merchants, artisans and others. Another important aspect of the urban economy during this period was the widespread use of metallic money for transactions in cash. Use of coinage had become prevalent in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but now due to development of commerce, coins became a common occurrence. The salaries of the officials were paid in cash.

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## 16.6 ARTHASHASTRA AND THE SAPTANGA THEORY

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The *Arthashastra* is the first South Asian text which offers a theory of the State as being composed of seven constituent elements. Kautilya puts forward the concept of *saptanga rajya* to understand the State – a system of seven inter-related and interlacing constituent limbs or elements (*angas* or *prakritis*). This concept of the *saptanga-rajya* was accepted and found in much later texts including the *Dharmashastras*, the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*, with a few modifications.

These seven elements were, in the order below:

- 1) *svami* (the king)
- 2) *amatya* (ministers)
- 3) *janapada* (the territory and its people, i.e., subjects)
- 4) *durga* (a fortified capital)
- 5) *kosha* (the treasury)
- 6) *danda* (justice or force)
- 7) *mitra* (ally)

Dividing the State into seven basic constituents allowed one to assess the individual strength or weakness of each constituent. Each of the seven constituent elements is defined by a group of ideal qualities. The elements are not equal.

### *Svami*

Monarchy is considered the norm by the *Arthashastra* and all its teaching is addressed to the king. For Kautilya, the fate of the king was closely tied to that of his subject population. If the king was energetic, then his subjects too would be energetic. Conversely if he was lazy, his subjects too would be lazy and eat into the kingdom's wealth. Thus, Kautilya advocated for a constantly alert, diligent and sensible king.

Ashoka's inscriptions give us a sense of kingship that was quite close to what Kautilya prescribed. We know from his Minor Rock Edicts that Ashoka adopted a very unassuming title, the *raja* of Magadha, as opposed the very grand titles of later times like *maharaja*, or *maharajadhiraja*. However, the preferred epithet in the inscriptions is '*Devanamapiya*' or the 'beloved of the gods', suggesting attempts to proclaim a divine connection. Ashoka also laid the foundations of a new kind of 'paternalistic kingship' by stating 'All men are my children' in Rock Edicts I and II. He elaborated further on his ideals of kingship by committing to ensure the welfare of all beings and his subjects in this world and the next.

### *Amatya*

The term '*amatya*' was an umbrella term that included all the high-ranking officials, counsellors and executive heads of department. The *Arthashastra* mentions two kinds of consultative bodies. The first was a small consultative body of *mantrins* (ministers) called the *mantra-parishad*. The other was a larger body of all the executive heads of the department, called the *mantri-parishad*.

An important functionary in Kautilya's administration was the *purohita* (royal priest). The *Arthashastra* states that the *purohita* should belong to a reputed family and should be thoroughly trained in the *Vedas*, the interpretation of divine signs and omens, as well as the science of politics. We can also assess the *purohita's* importance by looking at the figures of salaries given by Kautilya. According to Kautilya, the highest officials were paid extremely well, with the chief minister, the *purhoita*, and the army commander receiving 48,000 *panas* and the treasurer and the chief collector 24,000 *panas*. Even if Kautilya's estimates are only approximate, we can assume that the higher officials in the administration were extraordinarily well-paid, and their salaries would have constituted a large chunk of the total revenue collected.

### *Janapada*

This referred to a recognized territory as the realm of the empire. The *Janapada* was a major source of income for the king and the text demonstrates the various investments, rewards, and punitive strategies used by the State to maximize its tax income based on agricultural production. Additionally, attention to trade routes, port cities, demonstrates the extent that economic interests dominated the king's sense of his own greater territory.

### *Durga*

Crucial to the defense of the realm, fortified cities protect important border regions, serve as sanctuaries during times of attack, and house the major economic and administrative centers of the state. The ideal state of the *Arthashastra* possesses a number of fortresses, differing in geographical setting and purpose. The largest of the fortresses is the capital city, which operates as an administrative, economic, and military hub for the kingdom. Kautilya says that it should be constructed with mud ramparts and parapets built of brick and stone, the fort would be well-stocked with supplies of grain and necessities in case of a siege. Interestingly, the Greek accounts describe Pataliputra, the Magadhan capital, on a similar grand scale.

Kautilya also suggested stationing troops along the approaches to the fort. He refers to a standing army with four main divisions – infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. From Ashoka's edicts we know that after the Kalinga war, Ashoka made efforts at pacifism and committed himself to *dhamma-vijaya* (victory through *dharma*), rather than war. Yet, significantly, he did not disband the army.

### *Danda*

*Danda* can be understood as a reference to force or justice. The *Arthashastra* lays out the judicial system in detail with references to *dharmasthas* (judges) and *pradeshtris* (officers responsible for suppression of criminals). Punishments for offences and crimes ranged from fines to mutilation of limbs, or even capital punishment. For Kautilya, the nature of punishment depended not only upon the nature and gravity of the crime, but also on the *varna* of the offender. For the same crime, Kautilya set aside lighter punishments for higher *varnas*. For example, if a kshatriya had sexual relations with a brahmin woman, he was to pay the highest fine. For the same offence, a vaishya could have his entire property confiscated. The worst punishment was reserved for a shudra.

In Ashoka's inscriptions the judicial responsibilities lay with the city *mahamatas*. The edicts urge the *mahamatas* to be impartial and ensure that people are not

imprisoned or punished without sufficient evidence. Pillar Edict IV contains Ashoka's claim that he had introduced *samata* in judicial procedure. According to some interpretations this meant that he had established a uniform rule of law, abolishing *varna* distinctions in punishments.

### *Mitra*

This element refers to 'friends' of the realm, or political allies. At the centre of Kautilya's polity is the *vijigishu* – the would-be conqueror. The inter-state policy is about the several players around the *vijigishu* – the *ari* (enemy), *madhyama* (the middle king), and the *udasina* (the indifferent or neutral king). Kautilya further listed various policies and strategies that the king could adopt according to the circumstances, ranging from peace treaty (*sandhi*) if the enemy was stronger, to *vigraha* (hostility) if the enemy was weaker. Other options included military expeditions or teaming up with the enemy's enemy and attacking together.

Ashoka sent missions to the Hellenistic kingdoms in the north-west, with the purpose of enhancing trade with them. Of these the most prominent was the Mauryan relationship with the Seleucids, right from the treaty signed under Chandragupta. Diplomatic exchanges continued with subsequent rulers. Ashoka also mentions other contemporaries with whom he exchanged missions. His inscriptions mention the Greek king Antiyoga, as well as the lands of the kings Tulamaya, Anetika, Make and Alikyashudala. These have been identified by historians, respectively, as Antiochus II of Syria (260-246 BCE), Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (285-247 BCE), Antigonus Gonatus of Macedonia (276-239 BCE), Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander of Epirus. Ashoka also dispatched special ministers on *dhamma* missions to frontier regions and neighbouring realms, to spread the word of *Dhamma* and the teachings of the Buddha.

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## 16.7 ADMINISTRATION

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Mauryan empire was a vast territorial entity. Various levels of administration were required to govern it well. The *Arthashastra*, Greek accounts and Ashokan inscriptions give us a good idea about the administrative system. The administrative structure involved a division of the empire into provinces, each under the direct governance of a prince (*kumara*) or a member of the royal family. The inscriptions suggest four such provinces – a southern one with its centre at Survarnagiri, a northern province with capital at Taxila, a western one with its capital at Ujjayini, and an eastern one with its capital at Tosali. Ashokan inscriptions also referred to these governors as *kumara*, suggesting a continuation of the tradition of appointing royal princes to these important posts.

Senior officers called *pradeshikas* were tasked with touring the empire every five years and perform an audit as well as keep a check on the provincial administration. In addition, there were judicial officers, *rajukas*, in both urban and rural areas, whose judicial functions often combined with assessment of revenue. A well-organized administration was needed for a variety of tasks such as surplus production, extraction of surplus, its distribution or expenditure, strong army to conquer areas, tax collection from traders and agriculturalists etc.

Let us look at the details of Mauryan administration below.



## 16.7.1 Central Administration

The central administration can be classified under the following categories:

- a) The king
- b) The council of ministers
- c) City administration
- d) Army
- e) Espionage network
- f) Law and justice
- g) Public welfare

Let's discuss each of these categories separately.

- a) **The King:** The king has been given primacy even in the normative texts. The *Arthashastra* considers the king as the central focus of administration. He had the power to appoint or remove the ministers (*amatyas*); defend the treasury and the people; look after the welfare of the people; punish criminals; influence the people (*praja*) through his morality. According to the *Arthashastra*, the king's decision could override *shastric* injunctions if found to be differing from the latter.

The texts prescribe certain qualities that a king should possess. These are: birth in a high family; capability to control kings and officials; sharp intellect; truthfulness; and upholder of *Dharma*. He should be a skillful warrior, should perfect all domains of economic life, and writing (*lipi*). Besides this, the texts specify certain preconditions that the king should fulfill. For example, he should pay equal attention to all matters; remain vigilant and active for taking action or corrective measures; he should always discharge his duties; be accessible to his advisors and officials. Both from Megasthenes and Ashokan edicts it becomes evident that these injunctions were followed by the Magadhan kings.

Ashoka's role as an ideal king was augmented by his paternalistic attitude towards his subjects. He was deeply concerned about the welfare of his people but at the same time he was an absolute monarch. He adopted the title of *Devanampiya* (beloved of the Gods) which according to Romila Thapar underlined his close connection with the Divine power even to the degree of excluding the intermediaries, the priests. This indicates that the king was exercising his authority in religious matters as well.

- b) **Council of Ministers:** The *Arthashastra* and even Ashokan edicts mention a *mantri parishad* (council of ministers). It is mentioned in the *Arthashastra* that the state cannot function without the assistance of ministers. Rock Edict III says that the *Parishad* was expected to ensure that the new administrative measures were being carried out well by the different categories of the council. Similarly, Rock Edict VI mentions that the ministers can discuss the king's policy during his absence; suggest amendments; decide upon any important matter which the king had left to them. Yet the Council had to report its opinion to the king immediately. The primary role of the Council was advisory in nature. The king's decision was final in all respects.

There was an emphasis on majority opinion in the Council (*Bhuvyist*). In cases where the majority verdict was not agreeable, then the king's decision prevailed. The qualifications which the prospective ministers should fulfill have been clearly specified; these were: they should not be lured by wealth; should not succumb to pressure; he should be a *sarvopadashudha* (purest of all). There was also an inner council of ministers (*mantrins*) who were consulted on issues which needed immediate attention.

- c) **City Administration:** There are a number of references to city administration with regard to Palibothra (Pataliputra) by Megasthenes. In this account, the city council was divided into six sub-councils or committees and each committee had five members. These were:

*First Committee:* It looked after industry and crafts. It inspected such centers and looked after fixing of wages etc.

*Second Committee:* It looked after the foreigners. Its functions included arranging for their food, stay, comfort, and security.

*Third committee:* Registration of births and deaths

*Fourth Committee:* Looked after trade and commerce. It inspected weights and measures, markets etc.

*Fifth Committee:* Inspected manufactured goods, made provisions for their sale and steps taken to distinguish between new and second-hand goods

*Sixth Committee:* It collected taxes on the goods sold, the rate being 1/10<sup>th</sup>.

Though the *Arthashastra* does not mention any such committees, the functions specified above have been mentioned. For example, the functions of the fourth committee were performed by the *Panyadhyaksha*; the collection of taxes (sixth committee) was the responsibility of *Sulkahyaksha* and the registration of births and deaths was the work of *Gopa*. The head of the urban administration was called *Nagarika*. He was assisted by two subordinate officials-*Gopa* and *Sthanika*. Other officials are also mentioned such as *Bandhanagaradhyaksha* (looked after the jail); *Rakshi* (i.e. the police; looked after the security of the people); *Lohadhyaksha*, *Sauvarnika* (officials who looked after goods that were manufactured in the centers).

The city administration was elaborate and well planned. Penalties and punishments were prescribed for various offences. No one was above the law. Even law enforcers like the police were to be penalized for any wrong doings. Similarly, the citizens were punished if found guilty of transgressing rules.

- d) **The Army:** The Kalinga war, retreat of Seleucus, descriptive accounts of the army in *Arthashastra* all indicate that the Mauryas had a large army. It included infantry, cavalry, elephants, chariots, transport and admiral of fleet. Both the Greek and Indian literary sources refer to the fact that Chandragupta's army that was raised against the Nanda kings also included mercenary soldiers. According to Pliny's account, Chandragupta's army consisted of 9000 elephants, 3000 cavalry and 6000 infantry. Plutarch's account refers to 6000 elephants, 80000 horses, 20000 foot soldiers, and 8000 war chariots.

Kautilya too refers to a standing army with four main divisions – infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. Each of these divisions was placed under commanding officers respectively known as *patyadhyaksha*, *ashvadhyaksha*, *rathadhyaksha*, and *hastyadhakshya*. Megasthenes describes a similar arrangement of six committees of five members each, in charge of navy, supervision of equipment and transport, infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants. Besides, there was a provision for medical service to the army.

There were also officials like the *Ayudhagaradhyaksha* who looked after the production and maintenance of a variety of armaments. The *Arthashastra* also refers to the recruitment policy, war plans and fortifications. The officers and soldiers were paid in cash. The salaries of army officers ranged between 4000 *panas*-48000 *panas*.

- e) **Espionage:** *Arthashastra* mentions a well-knit system of espionage. The spies were supposed to keep an eye on the ministers, government officials, collect impressions regarding the feelings of the citizens and know the secrets of foreign kings. They reported directly to the kings on urgent matters. They not only went under disguise but also contacted barbers, cooks etc. to collect information. The *Arthashastra* described a very elaborate setup with regard to these spies, enlisting two types: stationary (*samstha*) and roving (*sanchara*), which then were further sub-divided into nine types. The head of the secret service in the *Arthashastra* was the *samahartta*, who was primarily tasked with the collection of revenue. Yet another task was the protection of the king. In fact, the king's bodyguard was known to consist of women archers who also accompanied him on hunts. Additionally, women too were employed by the State as spies.
- f) **Justice and Punishment:** An orderly legal system was in place to ensure social order, smooth functioning of the administrative system and flow of revenue to the State. The *Arthashastra* lists a number of punishments for various offences. These ranged from violation of marriage laws, divorce, murder, theft, adulteration, wrong weights etc. There were various kinds of courts to settle disputes and read out punishments to the offenders.

The *Arthashastra* lays out the judicial system in detail with references to *dharmasthas* (judges) and *pradeshtris* (officers responsible for suppression of criminals). Punishments for offences and crimes ranged from fines to mutilation of limbs, or even capital punishment.

The king was the supreme arbiter of justice and upholder of dharma. Though the crimes were few, cases were decided by a 'body of arbitrators' with a system of appeal to the king. In Ashoka's inscriptions the judicial responsibilities lay with the city *mahamatas*. The edicts urge the *mahamatas* to be impartial and ensure that people are not imprisoned or punished without sufficient evidence. Rock Edict I in particular states that every five years, the king would dispatch a gentle officer, neither fierce nor harsh, on a tour of inspection to ensure that this was being done.

- g) **Public Welfare:** Ashoka as evident from his many edicts was devoted to the welfare of his subjects. A number of public welfare works were undertaken during the reign of the Mauryas. For instance, irrigation was considered of paramount importance by the State. Megasthenes has

mentioned officials who supervised irrigation. The modes of irrigation and types of water resources were afforded protection, and anyone found causing damage was punished. The State encouraged people to repair dams at their own initiative and in return were granted revenue remissions. According to the Junagadh Rudradaman's inscription (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), Sudarshana lake was constructed during the time of Chandragupta. The State also laid down and repaired roads. Medical treatment and medicines were made available to the needy. We have references to medicine men of various kinds and ordinary physicians (*Chikitsakah*), midwives (*garbhavyadhi*) etc. Ashoka exhorted that the orphans, old women should be looked after. The citizens were given protection against natural calamities like famines, floods etc. Thus, the State invested a certain portion of its revenue in the general welfare of its subjects.

### 16.7.2 District and Village Level Administration

According to the *Arthashastra*, the smallest unit of administration was the village. A few villages were grouped as one district, and a collection of districts formed a province. Each district was to have an accountant to maintain records of boundaries, registered land and deeds as well as kept a census of population and a record of the livestock. There was also a tax collector for every district, responsible for various types of revenue. At the village level, the most important functionary was the village headman, who was accountable to the district accountant and tax collector.

At the district level, the officials listed were *Pradeshika*, *Rajuka* and *Yukta*. *Pradeshika* was the overall in-charge of the district. The *Yukta* was a junior officer giving secretarial kind of assistance to the other two. The officials fulfilled the following duties: survey and assessment of land; tours and inspections; revenue collection; and maintaining law and order.

At times the king was in direct touch with these officers. The 4<sup>th</sup> pillar Edict mentions that Ashoka granted 'independent authority' to the *Rajukas* to carry out certain responsibilities related to public welfare. Besides this, there were checks and balances on the powers of each category of officials.

The local people appointed as officials in the village were called as *gramika*. Then, there was *Gopa* and *Sthanika* — two types of officers, acting as intermediaries between the district and village level administrative units. They were entrusted with the following duties: demarcating village boundaries; maintaining records of land; recording income and expenditure of people; recording taxes, revenues and fines. Despite the presence of such officials, the villages enjoyed certain degree of autonomy in administering their affairs.

The administrative system largely revolved around the efficient collection of taxes. We know from Ashoka's inscription at Lumbini that land revenue was of two kinds — *bali* and *bhaga*. The assessment of the tax varied from region to region, from being on 1/6<sup>th</sup> to a quarter of the produce of the land. 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the produce was paid in tax by the peasants. They also paid a tribute. Land tax (*bhaga*) was the main source of revenue. It was levied at 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the produce. It could have been higher in the Mauryan times. The Lumbini edict of Ashoka says that during his visit to the birthplace of the Buddha, he exempted the village from the payment of *bali* and reduced the payment of *bhaga* to 1/8<sup>th</sup>. Sharecropping was

another way by which the State collected agricultural resources. Sharecroppers were provided with seeds, oxen etc. and received arable land for cultivation. Such peasants gave half of the produce to the State. Other kinds of taxes were also prevalent. The peasants paid a tax called *pindakara*. It was paid by husbandmen, which was assessed on a group of villages. This was customary in nature. The villages also provided provisions to the army passing through their respective territories. Then, there was a tax called *hiranya*. Its nature is not clear. It was paid in cash. Some taxes could have been voluntary. For example, *pranaya* was a tax which literally means gift of affection. Panini mentions it first but Kautilya elaborates upon it. It amounted to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> or 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the produce according to the nature of soil. Over time it may have become obligatory.

Megasthenes also assumed that all land belonged to the king, and the cultivators tilled the land on the condition that they paid in kind one fourth of the produce as tax. Yet other Greek accounts seem to suggest that the cultivator *received* one fourth of the produce for tilling the land of the king. We have references to crown land called *sita* which was held by the ruler and designated as his own land (*svabhumi*). These crown lands were cultivated under the supervision of State, by sharecroppers or tenant cultivators who paid a tax, or even by wage labour. In the *Arthashastra*, a *Sitadhyaksa* or superintendent of agriculture is mentioned who probably supervised the cultivation of *sita* lands.

The rest of the land in the Mauryan state, known as *Janapada* territories was most probably under private cultivators. The Jatakas mention *gahapatis* and *grambhojakas* who are said to have employed hired labourers, indicating that they were the land-owning gentry. The State's role in the provision of irrigation was crucial for a strong agricultural set up. The *Arthashastra* mentions a water cess which amounted to a fifth, a fourth or a third of the produce. In such areas cess was levied only on irrigated lands indicating that the state regulated irrigation facilities wherever rainfall was scarce. As said before, collection of land revenue through taxes was an important affair of the state. The highest officer in charge of this was the *samaharta*. The *sannidhata* was the chief custodian of the State treasury. Since the revenue was collected in kind also, providing storage facilities for grains was the responsibility of the State.

Labour was provided by the *dasa-karmakaras* – slaves and hired labour. According to *Arthashastra* the various categories of labour included wage labour, bonded labour, and slave labour.

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## 16.8 SOCIETY

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Megasthenes and later Greek authors describe Indian society at the time of Mauryas as being divided into seven distinct groups – philosophers, cultivators, hunters and herdsmen, artisans and traders, overseers (spies) and the king's counselors. The Greek authors describe these groups as the seven '*genos*'. Megasthenes notes that these occupations were hereditary in nature and inter-marriage between groups was not allowed – two features crucial to the functioning of the caste system. Let us look and compare Megasthenes' categories with other primary sources.

Megasthenes describes the '*philosophoi*' (sophists and philosophers) as being held in very high esteem in India. Strabo divided them further into two groups, the *brachmanes* (Brahmanas) and *garmanes* (shramanas). They were considered

as public benefactors, making prophecies and were exempted from paying taxes. We know from other texts that brahmanas and *sramanas* were used as general descriptive terms in later periods. The *sramanas* for example referred to a range of ascetic groups and sects – Buddhist, Jaina, Ajivika, etc.

About the second category, Megasthenes writes that cultivators were the most numerous of all groups. Clearly, the bulk of the population was engaged in agriculture. In fact, the Greek writers were struck by the large scale of agrarian operations. All accounts speak of the profusion and diversity of crops, achieved due to the profitable combination of highly fertile soil, presence of rivers and plentiful rainfall.

The third category mentioned by Megasthenes is that of hunters and herdsmen. According to Megasthenes these people lived outside agrarian settlements. Hunters and gatherers cleared the country of unwanted beasts and birds. According to *Arthashastra*, forests could not be privately cleared, and clearance was supervised by the State. The State was involved in collecting and taxing forest produce. Non-agrarian activities such as herding of animals were practiced even within villages. Kautilya even listed animals amongst items that were assessed and taxed.

Megasthenes' fourth group also relates to non-agrarian activities – artisans and traders. Some Greek authors suggest that all artisans (*technitai*) were employed by State and exempted from paying taxes. According to Strabo, apart from independent artisans, the armourers and shipbuilders were employed by State and paid a wage. Most of the artisans either worked individually or as members of associations. These associations – *shreni* or *puga* – gradually became powerful and were extremely influential as patrons of religious sects and visual arts. Megasthenes was wrong in stating that Indians did not borrow or lend money on interest, since money-lending was known and practiced from early times.

The fifth group noted by the Greeks was the soldiers, the second largest group in terms of numbers. The Mauryas had a standing army; the size and estimates vary across sources. According to Pliny, the army comprised 700 elephants, 1,000 horses and 80,000 infantry. Further one can conclude from the vast size that recruitment to the army was not limited to the *kshatriyas*, the traditional warrior group. Maintaining such a large army would have been a burden on resources and may have encouraged frequent and high taxation.

Closely associated with the army was the sixth group, the overseers (spies or inspectors). According to Greek accounts they were the most trusted persons in the realm and never lied. However, Kautilya recommended a spy's report should be corroborated by three other sources to be deemed acceptable.

The last group that Megasthenes mentions is the king's counsellors. This group was the smallest in number. They included the highest administrative functionaries of the realm, including army generals, revenue heads, etc. The nearest equivalent of this group in the Indian sources is the *amatyas* or *mantris*.

Megasthenes however seems to think that there was no concept of slavery in India. On the other hand, we know from other sources of situations that led to enslavement – a person could be a slave either by birth, by voluntary selling themselves, by being captured in war, or as a result of judicial punishment. We

also know of a tax termed *vishti* that was paid in labour to the State. Kautilya also described different kinds of slaves.

### Megasthenes' Indica: A Case Study

Megasthenes was originally a representative of Seleucus Nikator at the court of Sibyrtios, the governor of Arachosia (present day Kandahar region in Afghanistan). After the treaty between Chandragupta and Seleucus was settled, Megasthenes was sent as Seleucus' envoy to Chandragupta's court. Based on his travels and experiences in India, he wrote a book called the *Indica*. This work is lost. What survives of it is in the form of 'quotations' from later writers (Diodorous, Strabo, Arrian and Pliny) concerned with the Hellenistic world. Megasthenes' *Indica* described the country, whatever little he saw of it, its size and shape, rivers, soil, climate, plants, animals, agricultural produce, administration, society, and folktales. The animals in the subcontinent particularly captivated the Greek writers and their audiences, and they describe in detail the exotic animals such as elephants, monkeys and activities such as horse training and elephant training. They also noted the similarities with their own lands, especially in terms of legends and mythologies.

Whether Megasthenes is a reliable historian is a debatable question? There are a number of absurd statements that we find attributed to Megasthenes. For example, there was no slavery in India, or that Indians never lied, and theft was rare, or that farmers were never touched in war, or that Indians did not borrow or lend money. When juxtaposed with other indigenous sources of the subcontinent, we know for a fact that these statements bear no truth.

Thus, information on the Mauryas from Greek sources comes to us through a double filter – the first was Megasthenes interpretation of what he saw or heard, and the second was of the later Graeco-Roman writers and their interpretations of Megasthenes. As a historian reading these texts, one needs to be aware of the perceptions of the authors and of those who later on paraphrased the original. The study of texts from the ancient period remains a complicated process and requires the removal of such filters. Thapar believes that Megasthenes' account was influenced by the fact that he was familiar with the Seleucid *satrapy* and hence *Indica* may have carried both Hellenistic and Seleucid imprint.

**Source:** Romila Thapar, 1993.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Write a note on the *Saptanga* theory of State as mentioned in the *Arthashastra*.
- 2) Describe in 100 words the administrative structure under the Mauryas
- 3) Mark which of the following statements are right (✓) or Wrong (×)
  - a) Shudras were employed for large scale agricultural operations. ( )
  - b) All villages in Mauryan India were under direct state control. ( )
  - c) According to *Arthashastra* the Council of Ministers' verdict was final before the king. ( )
  - d) The adoption of a paternal attitude towards his subjects was a new development in relation to king's attitude in Indian polity. ( )

- e) There is no description of city administration in the account of Megasthenes. ( )
- f) The king was central to the seven components of the State in Kautilya's scheme. ( )
- g) The Mauryan State spent a huge amount on the maintenance of the army. ( )
- h) The Mauryas had no system of espionage. ( )
- i) During this period there were certain rules and regulations for the functioning of courts. ( )
- j) The king had no right to grant revenue remissions. ( )

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## 16.9 SUMMARY

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The Maurya period saw the establishment of the first empire in the history of Indian subcontinent. Such a large empire required new strategies of governance. The complex system of administration set up under the Mauryas became the foundational basis of succeeding polities. Ashoka is known equally, if not more, for renouncing all military ambition and turning to his spiritual side. He decided to promote the cause of *dhamma*, inspired from his personal faith in the Buddha's teaching for the laity.

The social and economic processes of agrarian expansion and urbanization of the preceding centuries continued under Maurya rule, and there was a further growth in cities, trade, and the money economy. However, after Ashoka, the empire saw a swift and rapid decline. The next Unit will take a closer look at this 'zenith' and the subsequent decline.

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## 16.10 KEY WORDS

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<b><i>Ajivika</i></b>	: A heterodox sect of the time of the Buddha
<b>Cess</b>	: Tax
<b><i>Chakravartin/</i> <i>chakravartigal/chakkavatti</i></b>	: Universal monarch
<b>Classical Sources</b>	: Refers to the Greek sources for example the <i>Indica</i> of Megasthenes
<b>Diffusion</b>	: Spread from the center of origin
<b>Eclectic</b>	: Borrowing freely from diverse ideas and philosophies
<b>Espionage</b>	: Spy system
<b>Fiscal</b>	: Economic and financial measures
<b><i>Kahapana/karshapana/</i> <i>pana</i></b>	: Widely used coin series, often silver
<b><i>Sita Lands</i></b>	: Lands owned/controlled directly by the King



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## 16.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 16.2
- 2) See Section 16.4

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 16.6.
- 2) See Section 16.7 and its Sub-sections
- 3) a) ✓, b) x, c) x, d) ✓, e) x, f) ✓, g) ✓, h) x, i) ✓, j) x

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## 16.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Romila Thapar (1993). *The Mauryas Revisited*. Sakham Ganesh Deuskar Lectures on Indian History, 1984. Calcutta: KP Bagchi and Company.

Romila Thapar (1997). *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Revised Edition. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Romila Thapar (2003). *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. London: Penguin Books.

Upinder Singh (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Delhi: Pearson Longman.

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## UNIT 17 THE MAURYAS\*

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### Structure

- 17.0 Objectives
- 17.1 Introduction
- 17.2 Historical Background
- 17.3 Distribution of Inscriptions
- 17.4 *Dhamma*
  - 17.4.1 Causes
  - 17.4.2 Contents of *Dhamma*
  - 17.4.3 Ashoka's *Dhamma* and the Mauryan State
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- 17.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 17.11 Suggested Readings

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### 17.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the historical background to the formulation of the policy of *Dhamma*;
- Ashoka's *Dhamma*, its main characteristics; role of *Dhamma-mahamattas*;
- main features of Mauryan art and architecture; and
- the various factors responsible for the decline of the Mauryas.

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### 17.1 INTRODUCTION

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Many historians consider Ashoka as one of the greatest kings of the ancient world. His policy of *Dhamma* has been a topic of lively discussion among scholars. The word '*Dhamma*' is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word 'Dharma'. *Dhamma* has been variously translated as piety, moral life, righteousness and so on, but the best way to understand what Ashoka means by *Dhamma* is to read his edicts. The edicts were written primarily to explain to the people throughout the empire the principles of *Dhamma*. To make principles of *Dhamma* accessible and

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\* This Unit has been adopted from EHI-02, Block 5. The Section on 'Art and Architecture' has been written by Dr Suchi Dayal, Academic Consultant, Faculty of History, SOSS, IGNOU.

understandable to all, he put up edicts or inscriptions at important points throughout the empire and sent messengers of *Dhamma* outside the empire.

It must be clearly understood that *Dhamma* was not any particular religious faith or practice; so, we should not translate *Dhamma* (or its Sanskrit equivalent *Dharma*) as religion. It was also not an arbitrarily formulated royal policy. *Dhamma* related to norms of social behaviour and activities in a very general sense and in his *Dhamma*, Ashoka attempted a very careful synthesis of various norms which were current in his time. To understand why and how Ashoka formulated *Dhamma* and what he meant by it, one has therefore to understand the characteristics of the time in which he lived and to refer to Buddhist, Brahmanical and various other texts where norms of social behaviour are explained.

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## 17.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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To understand the various aspects of the policy of *Dhamma* and the reasons for its formulation we would necessarily need to sketch the historical background against which it became possible for Ashoka to enunciate it.

### Socio-Economic Background

The Mauryan period witnessed a change in the economic structure of the society. With the use of iron resulting in surplus production, a changeover took place from a simple rural economy to a pattern of economy in which cities and towns played an important part. It has been generally argued that the use of Northern Black Polished Ware is an indicator of material prosperity of the period. The use of punch-marked silver coins and some other varieties of coins, the conscious intervention of the State to safeguard trade routes, and the rise of urban centres point to a structural change in the economy which required necessary adjustments in the society. The commercial classes had also come to the forefront. The emergence of urban culture by its very logic demanded a more flexible social organization. The incorporation of tribes and peoples from the outlying areas into the social fabric also presented a problem. The response of the Brahmanical social order based on the four-fold *varna* division was to make the caste system more rigid and deny a higher status to the commercial class. The rigidity of the Brahmanical class sharpened the divisions within the society. The lower orders turned to the various heterodox sects and this created social tensions. It was this situation which Emperor Ashoka inherited when he ascended the Mauryan throne.

### Religious Conditions

The Brahmanical hold over society, assiduously built through the Later Vedic period, was coming under increasing attack. The lower orders among the four castes began to favour the new sects. The vaishyas who were commercially successful, and wealthy were treated as inferior to both the brahmanas and kshatriyas. The opposition of the commercial class to Brahmanism gave a fillip to other sects of the society. The basic tenet of Buddhism was an emphasis on misery and advocacy of the 'middle path'. Buddhism opposed the dominance of the brahmanas and the concept of sacrifices and rituals. It thus appealed to the lower orders and to the emerging social classes. The human approach to relations in society preached by Buddhism further attracted different sections to Buddhism.

## Polity

You have already read that the *Mahajanapadas* of the sixth century BCE marked the beginning of the State system in many parts of India. This means that only a small section of society came to have monopoly of power which they exercised over the rest of the society in various ways and for various purposes. There were monarchies in which the King was the supreme authority and there were *gana-samghas* in which the rulers were a group of hereditary kshatriyas or member of a clan. By the time, Ashoka ascended the throne, the State system, over a period of more than two hundred years, had grown very elaborate and complex. It was characterized by:

- The political supremacy of one region (Magadha) over a vast territory which comprised many previous kingdoms, *gana-samghas* and areas where no organized states had existed before.
- Existence, within this vast territory, of various geographical regions, cultural areas, and of different faiths, beliefs and practices.
- Monopoly of force by a ruling class of which the emperor was the supreme head.
- Appropriation of a very substantial quantity of surplus from agriculture, commerce and other sources.
- Existence of an administrative apparatus.

The complexity of the State system demanded an imaginative policy from the emperor which would entail minimal use of force in such a large empire having diverse forms of economic and religious systems. It could not have been controlled by an army alone. A more feasible alternative was the propagation of a policy that would work at an ideological level and reach out to all sections of the society. The policy of *Dhamma* was such an endeavour.

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### 17.3 DISTRIBUTION OF INSCRIPTIONS

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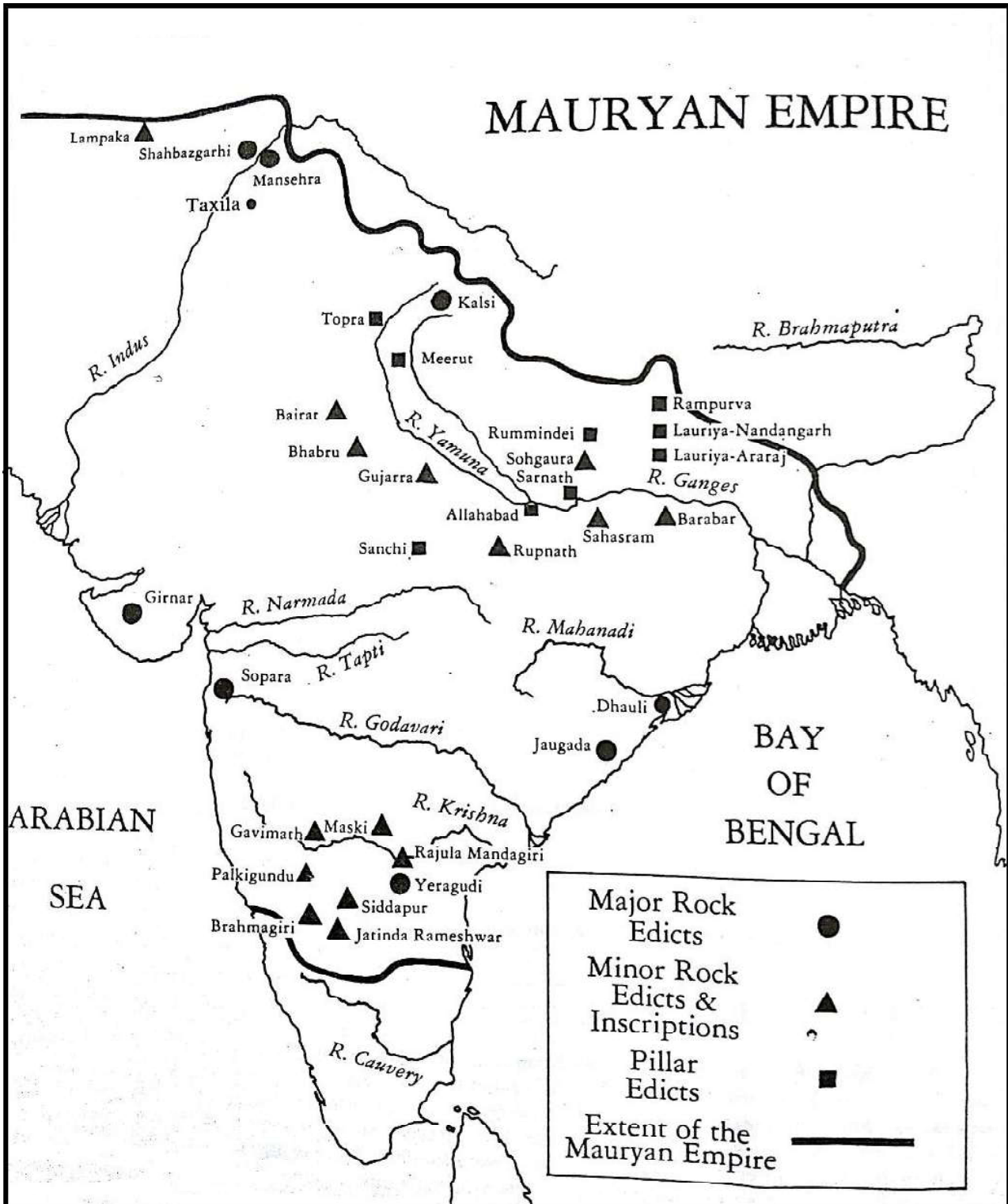
Ashoka used the medium of his edicts to expound the policy of *Dhamma*. Ashoka engraved his views about *Dhamma* on these edicts which were meant to be read by people of various areas. In doing so, Ashoka was trying to establish direct communication with his subjects. These inscriptions were written in different years of his rule.

The inscriptions can be divided into two categories. The smaller group of these inscriptions reveal that the king was a follower of Buddhism and were addressed to the Buddhist Church or the *Samgha*. In these there is declaration of Ashoka's own relationship with the Buddhist order. In one of the inscriptions he mentions by their title some of the scriptures with which all Buddhists should be familiar with.

Inscriptions of the other category are known as the Major and Minor Rock Edicts which were inscribed on rock surfaces. It also included the Pillar Edicts inscribed on specially erected pillars.

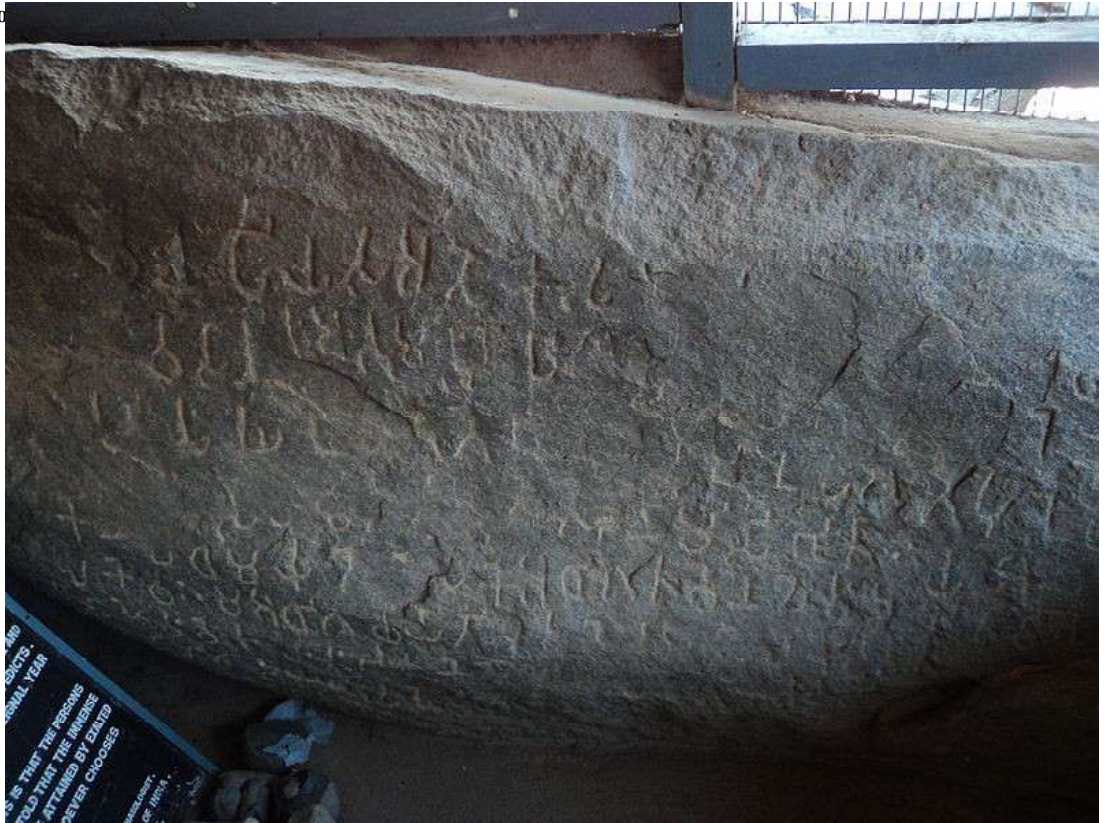
All sites of Ashokan inscriptions were chosen carefully to ensure that they were accessible to a large number of people. Thus, as has been pointed out, these edicts may be described as proclamations to the public at large. They explain the

idea of *Dhamma*. We must make a distinction between Ashoka's policy of *Dhamma* which stressed on social responsibility and Ashoka's own commitment as a Buddhist. There has been a tendency in the past amongst historians to study the policy of *Dhamma* and Ashoka as a Buddhist in the same context, without making any distinction. A careful examination of the inscriptions would suggest that Ashoka on the one hand declared his personal association with the Buddhist order and on the other he tried to teach, through the policy of *Dhamma*, the importance of social responsibility and toleration amongst different members of the society.



Map 17.1: Mauryan Inscriptions.

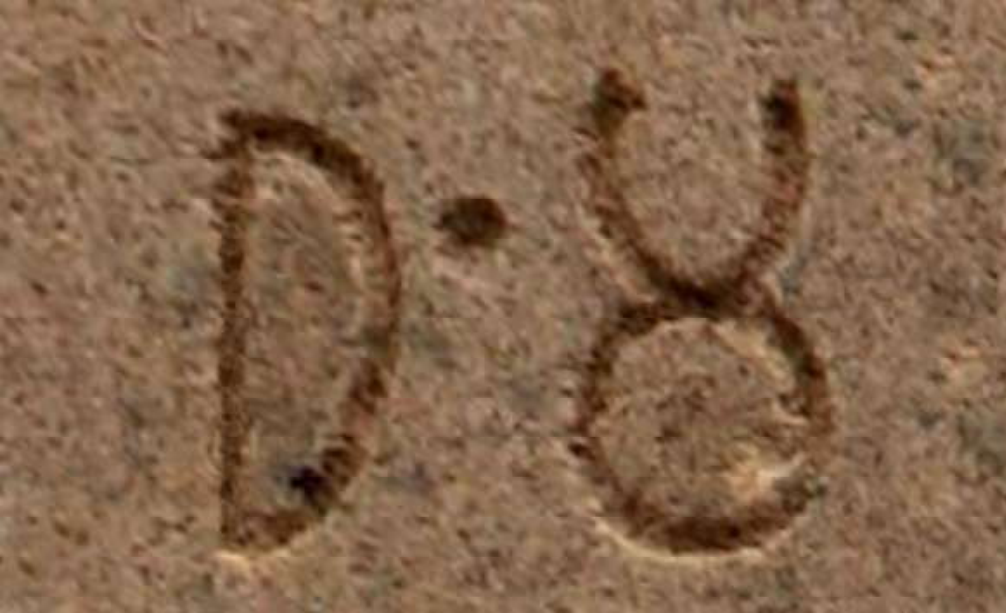
India: 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to  
BCE



Minor Rock Edict at Maski. It specifically mentions the name “Ashoka” (centre of the top line) in conjunction with the title ‘Devanampriya’ (Beloved-of-the-Gods). Credit: Sudeep m. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rock\\_edict-closer\\_look.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rock_edict-closer_look.JPG))



The Four Scripts used by Ashoka in his Edicts: Brahmi (top left), Kharoshthi (top right), Greek (bottom left) and Aramaic (Bottom right). Credit: For Brahmi inscription: Laura Solà; For Kharoshthi inscription: Niskhan65; For Greek inscription: Schlumberger; For Aramaic inscriptoin: Schlumberger ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_four\\_scripts\\_of\\_Ashoka.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_four_scripts_of_Ashoka.jpg))



The Prakrit Word “Dha-m-ma” (Sanskrit Dharma) in Brahmi Script, as inscribed by Ashoka in his Edicts. Topara Kalan Pillar, now in New Delhi. Credit: Abhatnagar2. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dhamma\\_inscription.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dhamma_inscription.jpg))

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## 17.4 DHAMMA

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The policy of *Dhamma* was an earnest attempt at solving some of the problems that a complex society faced. However, the policy was nurtured in the mind of Ashoka and through it he attempted to resolve some of the tensions within the society.

### 17.4.1 Causes

In examining the causes for the policy of *Dhamma*, we have already outlined the historical background, earlier in this Unit. We have suggested that Ashoka’s private beliefs and his own perceptions of how he should respond to the problems of his empire were responsible for the formulation of the policy of *Dhamma*. It is necessary for us to understand the immediate social environment in which Ashoka grew up as it influenced him in the later years of his life.

- The Mauryan kings are known to have adopted an eclectic outlook. Chandragupta took recourse to Jainism in his later years and Bindusara favoured the Ajivikas. Ashoka himself adopted Buddhism in his personal life, though he never imposed Buddhism on his subjects.
- By the time Ashoka ascended the throne the Mauryan imperial system had become a complex phenomenon. The imperial system encompassed various cultures, beliefs, social and political patterns. Ashoka had to either maintain the structure by force, which would have incurred tremendous expenses, or to define a set of social norms which would be acceptable to all, cutting across all social practices and religious beliefs. Ashoka found his answer in the policy of *Dhamma*.
- Ashoka was aware of the tensions which the rise of heterodox sects like Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikism had generated in the society. They were all opposed to the domination of the brahmanas in some way or the other

and had a growing number of supporters. But brahmanas continued to have a strong hold on society and some measure of hostility was inevitable. It was essential to bring about a climate of harmony and mutual trust in a situation such as this.

- There were obviously many areas within the empire where neither Brahmanical system nor the heterodox sects prevailed. Ashoka himself refers to the country of the Yavanas where neither Brahmanical nor *Sramanical* culture was in vogue. Besides, there were many tribal areas in the empire where people were obviously not familiar either with Brahmanical or heterodox ideas. To make the empire survive and to bring some measure of cohesion within the empire in the midst of such diversity it was essential that there should be some common pattern of behaviour and common approach to the problems of society.

### 17.4.2 Contents of *Dhamma*

The principles of *Dhamma* were so formulated as to be acceptable to people belonging to different communities and followers of any religious sect. *Dhamma* was not given any formal definition or structure. It emphasised on toleration and general behaviour. *Dhamma* stressed on dual toleration; it emphasised on toleration of people themselves and also toleration of their various beliefs and ideas. There is a stress on the notion of showing consideration towards slaves and servants; there is stress also on obedience to elders; generosity towards the needy, brahmanas and *sramanas*, etc. Ashoka also pleaded for tolerance of different religious sects in an attempt to create a sense of harmony.

The policy of *Dhamma* also laid stress on non-violence. Non-violence was to be practised by giving up war and conquests and also as a restraint on the killing of animals. However, Ashoka realized that a certain display of his political might may be necessary to keep the primitive forest tribes in check.

The policy of *Dhamma* also included certain welfare measures like planting of trees, digging of wells, etc. Ashoka attacked ceremonies and sacrifices practised regularly on various occasions as meaningless. A group of officers known as the *Dhamma-mahamattas* were instituted to implement and publicize the various aspects of *Dhamma*. Ashoka thrust a very heavy responsibility on them to carry his message to the various sections of the society. However, they seem gradually to have developed into a type of priesthood of *Dhamma* with great powers and soon began to interfere in politics as well.

Rock Edict XIII is of paramount importance in understanding the policy of *Dhamma* because it is a testament against war. It graphically depicts the tragedy of war and shows why Ashoka turned against it. It is a unique event in the annals of the ancient world because we do not know of any other contemporary monarch who renounced war. Ashoka embarked on the policy of *Dhamma* after this war.

### 17.4.3 Ashoka's *Dhamma* and the Mauryan State

Ashoka's *Dhamma* was not simply a collection of high-sounding phrases. He very consciously tried to adopt it as a matter of state policy for he declared that "*All men are my children*" and "*whatever exertion I make, I strive only to discharge the debt that I owe to all living creatures*". It was a totally new and



inspiring ideal of kingship. In the *Arthashastra* the King owed nothing to anyone. His only job was to rule the State efficiently.

Ashoka renounced war and conquest by violence and forbade the killing of many animals. Ashoka himself set the example of vegetarianism by almost stopping the consumption of meat in the royal household. Since he wanted to conquer the world through love and faith, he sent many missions to propagate *Dhamma*. Such missions were sent to far off places like Egypt, Greece, Sri Lanka, etc. The propagation of *Dhamma* included many measures for people's welfare. Centres for the medical treatment of men and beasts were founded inside and outside the empire. Shady groves, wells, fruit orchards and rest houses were laid out. This kind of charity work was a radically different attitude from the king of *Arthashastra* who would not incur any expenses unless they brought more revenues in return. Ashoka also prohibited useless sacrifices and certain forms of gatherings which led to waste, indiscipline and superstition. Part of *Dhamma-mahamattas'* duties was to see to it that people of various sects were treated fairly. Moreover, they were especially asked to look after the welfare of prisoners. Many convicts, who were kept in fetters after their sentence had expired, were to be released. Those sentenced to death were to be given a grace for three days. Ashoka also started *Dhammayatras*. He and his high officials were to tour the country in order to propagate *Dhamma* and establish direct contact with his subjects. It was because of such attitudes and policies that modern writers like Kern called him 'a monk in a king's garb'.

#### 17.4.4 *Dhamma-Interpretations*

The Ashokan policy of *Dhamma* has been an issue of intense controversy and debate amongst scholars. Some scholars have suggested that Ashoka was a partisan Buddhist and have equated *Dhamma* with Buddhism. It has also been suggested that it was the original Buddhist thought that was being preached by Ashoka as *Dhamma* and later certain theological additions were made to Buddhism. This kind of thinking is based on some Buddhist chronicles. It is believed that the Kalinga war was a dramatic turning point where Ashoka out of remorse for the death and destruction of war, decided to become a Buddhist. The Buddhist records also credit him with the propagation of Buddhism in India and abroad. One cannot, however, lay the charge of being partisan against Ashoka. There are two strong arguments to prove that Ashoka, as an emperor, did not favour Buddhism at the expense of other religious faiths.

- i) Ashoka's creation of the institution of the *Dhamma-mahamattas* convincingly proves that Ashoka's *Dhamma* did not favour any particular religious doctrine. Had that been the case, then there would have been no need for such an office, as Ashoka could have utilized the organisation of *Samgha* to propagate *Dhamma*.
- ii) A careful study of the Rock Edicts depicts that Ashoka wanted to promote tolerance and respect for all religious sects and the duty of the *Dhamma-mahamattas* included working for the brahmanas and the *sramanas*.

These two points make it clear that the policy of *Dhamma* was not the policy of a heretic, but a system of beliefs created out of different religious faiths. It has been shown by Romila Thapar that Ashoka's *Dhamma*, apart from being a superb document of his essential humaneness was also an answer to the socio-political

needs of the contemporary situation. That it was not anti-Brahmanical is proved by the fact that respect for the brahmanas and *sramanas* is an integral part of his *Dhamma*. His emphasis on non-violence did not blind him to the needs of the State. Thus, addressing the forest tribes he warns them that although he hates to use coercion he may be required to resort to force if they continue to create trouble. By the time Ashoka stopped war, the entire Indian sub-continent was under his control. In the deep south, he was on friendly terms with the Cholas and Pandyas. Sri Lanka was an admiring ally. Thus, Ashoka's 'no' to war came at a time when his empire had reached its natural boundaries. The plea for tolerance was a wise course of action in an ethnically diverse, religiously varied and class divided society. Ashoka's empire was a conglomerate of diverse groups. There were farmers, pastoral nomads and hunter-gatherers; there were Greeks, Kambojas and Bhojas and hundreds of groups having divergent traditions. In this situation a plea for tolerance was the need of the hour. Ashoka tried to transcend the parochial cultural traditions by a broad set of ethical principles. Ashoka's *Dhamma* could not survive him. As such it was a failure. However, we should remember that he was not establishing a new religion. He was simply trying to impress upon the society the need for ethical and moral principles.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

- 1) Write in ten lines about the historical background to the policy of Ashoka's *Dhamma*.

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- 2) What were the main principles of the policy of *Dhamma*?

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- 3) Enumerate the interpretations regarding *Dhamma*.

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## 17.5 MAURYAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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Mauryan art was a culmination of a long movement which began indigenously, flowered as time grew and reached out as well as received various impulses and influences. There are no extant examples of either sculpture or architecture that can be dated to the pre-Mauryan times. Whatever we have in terms of sculpture and architecture belongs to the Mauryan period especially to Ashoka's reign.

Scholars like Niharanjan Ray feel that Mauryan art was different from the earlier art traditions in the sense that it made a departure from the use of wood, sun dried brick, clay, ivory and metal to that of stone in huge dimensions. It is a possibility that the Mauryan artists replicated the art of working with wood that had existed on the Indian soil for hundreds of years. The stupa railings, gateways, *chaitya* facades all bear the details of ornamentation which are a copy of the wooden prototype. However, Ray maintains that the kind of execution in stone the Mauryans excelled in, is difficult to explain with reference to the work in wood, no matter how large and monumental, with whatever technical skill and finesse the latter was achieved.

The second feature of Mauryan art is its Achaemenid connection. Mauryan dominions under Chandragupta Maurya touched Afghanistan and what had been erstwhile Achaemenid possessions. Mauryan kings also had close intimate relations with the Hellenistic court. In the realm of art, Hellenistic art borrowed and was influenced heavily by Achaemenid art traditions. Scholars feel that Mauryas' close contacts with the Hellenistic east must also have brought them in indirect contact with Achaemenid art and culture. That is how Mauryan art came to reflect Achaemenid influences. Not only do the remains of the city of Pataliputra remind one of Susa and Ekbatana but the Pillared Hall at Kumrahar also compares well with the Hall of Hundred Columns erected at Persepolis by Darius the great. Besides this, the Ashokan pillars and the form of his inscriptions prove that they were inspired by Achaemenid practice.

However, a yet another school of thought believes that the elements of Mauryan art were indigenous in origin. It was a happy combination of folk and court elements. It was the folk wooden shaft that was petrified. Even the famous Mauryan polish had pre-Mauryan beginnings. Besides, the motifs of bull, lion, lotus, geese that were used in the Ashokan pillars had indigenous antecedents. So, rather than an episode in the history of art, Mauryan art rather was a continuation of tradition that was as old as the Vedas.

The campanile Ashokan pillars and the bell capitals are considered 'Persepolitan' in inspiration. Devahuti however believes that they were not a copy of the Persian model. Both the Persian and Ashokan examples are cognates owing their origin to a West Asian ancestor — the Aryans. Besides, *stambha* architecture which had its beginning in wood was transformed into a new medium, stone. Gradually it acquired capitals and bases, with the shaft also becoming eight or sixteen sided. The pillars found in the caves of Karle, Bedsa, Nasik, Kanheri (second century BCE to second century CE), Ajanta (cave XIX), Ellora (sixth to eighth century CE) all provide examples of these changes while many pillars still retained Mauryan features. The bell capitals supporting either female figures with bovine bodies below the hips (Bhaja); elephants and horses (Bedsa); addorsed lions (Karle), their pose and arrangement remind one of Persepolis, but they are as rooted in the Indian soil as the lotus and swastika motifs are.

## 17.5.1 Examples of Mauryan Art

The most important examples of Mauryan art include:

- 1) Remains of the royal palace and the city of Pataliputra
- 2) A monolithic railing at Sarnath
- 3) The excavated *chaitya* halls or cave dwellings in the Barabar-Nagarjuni group of hills in Gaya.
- 4) The non-edict bearing and edict bearing pillars with their capitals.
- 5) The front half of an elephant carved in round from a live rock in Dhauli in Odisha.

There are certain common elements shared by the above-mentioned elements of art. These are: all of them are monumental in conception and design; fine, orderly, and precise in execution; with the exception of the remains of the royal palace and city buildings of Pataliputra, they are all made of grey sand stone of huge proportions; beautifully chiselled and display a high polish; they are examples of royal art which is associated more with emperor Ashoka and his successors.

### *Pataliputra*

Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital bears the stamp of Imperial art. According to Megasthenes, the city of Pataliputra was about fifteen kilometers long, two and a half kilometres in width, and was surrounded by a moat that measured about two hundred meters wide and fifteen meters deep. The ramparts of the city had sixty-four gates and some five hundred and seventy towers. Excavations have unearthed a small portion of the ancient city as most of it is occupied by modern habitation. In addition, most of the structures were probably made of wood and brick which did not survive the floods and vagaries of time. Two sites have been



Mauryan remains of Wooden Palisade at Bulandibagh site of Pataliputra. Credit: ASIEC 1912-13. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan\\_remains\\_of\\_wooden\\_palissade\\_at\\_Bulandi\\_Bagh\\_site\\_of\\_Pataliputra\\_ASIEC\\_1912-13.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan_remains_of_wooden_palissade_at_Bulandi_Bagh_site_of_Pataliputra_ASIEC_1912-13.jpg))

partially explored — Bulandibagh and Kumrahar. At Bulandibagh remains of a huge wooden stockade and fortification walls have been unearthed. At Kumrahar have been found remains of the Mauryan Palace complex enclosed within a high brick wall. Remains of eighty stone columns have been found, highly polished, which supported a wooden superstructure and had wooden bases. The differences between the 100 pillared hall of Persepolis and the Mauryan Palace have been pointed out by Devahuti. Though both shared the concept of hypostyle hall and lustrous polish, the wooden pillars of Chandragupta's time according to Greek writers are described as "clasped around with vines embossed in gold and ornamented with designs of bird and foliage"; those in the courts of Ecbatana are stated to have been "all covered with silver plate." The differences can be seen in the simplicity that Mauryan Palace pillars were crafted with as compared to the Achaemenid columns of the Hall of Xerxes. The shafts are plain, without a base or a capital and made of one piece in contrast to the fluted Achaemenian pillar made up of several blocks, with a base and an elaborate capital. The lustrous polish had antecedents both in India and West Asia.

*Edicts and Pillars:* Mauryan pillars are free standing, tall, well proportionate, with tapering shafts and monolithic in nature. They are made of sandstone which was quarried at Chunar. The pillars have a lustrous polish. They do not have a base. The capital is joined to the tapering end of the shaft with a cylindrical bolt. The capital is in the shape of inverted lotus (often referred to as the bell capital). On top of it is an abacus (platform) which finally supports an animal carved in round.

The columns that carry Ashokan inscriptions are those of Delhi-Mirat, Allahabad, Lauriya-Araraj, Lauriya-Nandangarh, Rampurva (with lion capital), Delhi-Topara, Sankisya, Sanchi and Sarnath. The non-edict bearing columns include those of Rampurva (with a bull capital), Basarh-Bakhira (with a single lion capital), and Kosam. Columns bearing dedicatory inscriptions have been found at Rummendei and Nigali Sagar. Of these, the capitals of Lauriya-Nandangarh and Basarh-Bakhira are *in situ*. Those of Rampurva, Sankisya, Sarnath and Sanchi have been recovered in



**Sarnath Lion Capital.** Credit: Chrisi 1964. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sarnath\\_capital.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sarnath_capital.jpg))

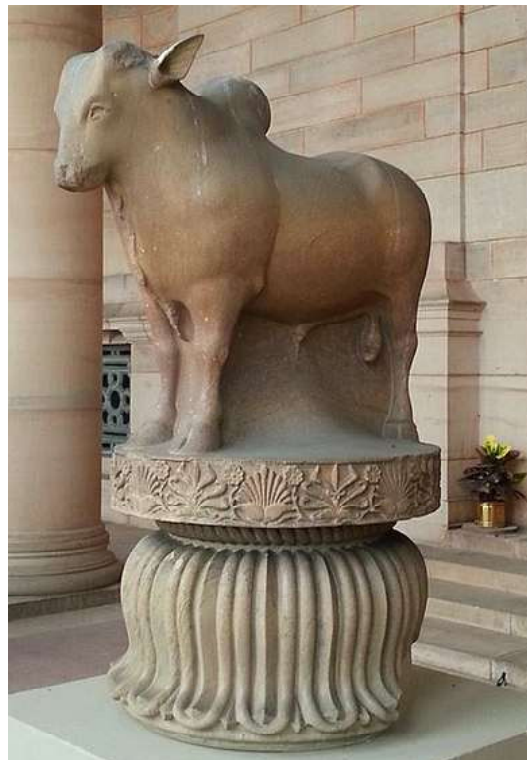
India: 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to 200 BCE

a damaged condition. As far as the crowned animals are concerned, the Lauriya-Nandangarh and Basarh-Bakhira, and one of the Rampurva pillars has a surmounted lion seated on its hunches; the Sankisya pillar supports a standing elephant; the second Ramapurva pillar, a standing bull; Sarnath and Sanchi columns, four lions sitting back to back. The Lauriya-Araraj column may have had a Garuda capital. Except for the horse, the other symbols are very much present in early Brahmanical imagery.

From the reading of inscriptions at Rupnath and Sahasram, and the VII<sup>th</sup> pillar edict, it is clear that some of the pillars that carry Ashoka's inscriptions could be pre-Mauryan in age, hence, not particularly Buddhist in character. Some were erected by Ashoka himself as *Dharmastambhas*.



Mauryan Ring Stone with Standing Goddess. Northwest Pakistan. Credit: British Museum. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan\\_Ringstone.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan_Ringstone.JPG))

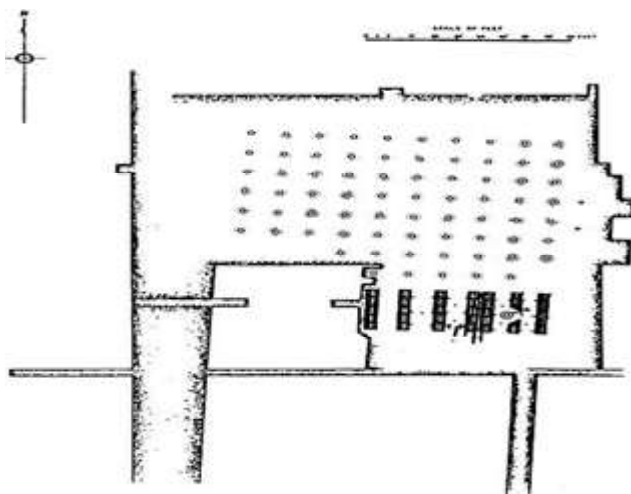


Bull capital Rampurva now in Presidential Palace. Credit: M.Amitav GHOSH Source: Wikipedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rampurva\\_bull\\_in\\_Presidential\\_Palace\\_high\\_closeup.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rampurva_bull_in_Presidential_Palace_high_closeup.jpg))

Though the pillars and the capitals are of stone, they were copies of primitive wooden animal standards. Further, the surviving examples do not present a unified picture, but vary greatly in type of stone, polish or lack of polish, proportions, treatment of sculptural details, dowelling techniques, and even methods of insertion into the earth. Scholars have tried to understand the symbolism inherent in the columns. According to John Irwin, the pillars represent the World Axis. In ancient cultures, world axis was an instrument that separated earth from heaven during the creation of the universe. The pillar appears to emerge from the cosmic ocean and reaches out to the skies where it is touched by the sun. The Ashokan pillars do not have a base and are directly rooted into the soil. They seem to emerge from the earth as if rising to touch the heavens.



Rampurva Lion Capital. Credit: Biswarup Ganguly. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lion\\_Capital\\_-\\_Chunar\\_Sandstone\\_-\\_Circa\\_3rd\\_Century\\_BCE\\_-\\_Rampurva\\_-\\_ACCN\\_6298-6299\\_-\\_Indian\\_Museum\\_-\\_Kolkata\\_2014-04-04\\_4432.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lion_Capital_-_Chunar_Sandstone_-_Circa_3rd_Century_BCE_-_Rampurva_-_ACCN_6298-6299_-_Indian_Museum_-_Kolkata_2014-04-04_4432.JPG))



Plan of the 80-Column Pillared Hall at Kumrahar. ASIEC 1912-13. Credit: David B. Spooner. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kumrahar\\_Maurya\\_level\\_ASIEC\\_1912-1913.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kumrahar_Maurya_level_ASIEC_1912-1913.jpg))



Fig. 17.1: The Stone Elephant at Dhauli. Credit: Kumar Shakti. ASI Monument no. N-OR-59. Source: Wikimedia Commons. (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elephant-sculpture-dhauri.JPG>)



Lohanipur Torso showing Characteristic Mauryan Polish. Credit: Hpgoa. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lohanipur\\_torso.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lohanipur_torso.jpg))

### *Monolithic Railing at Sarnath*

A polished fragment of a monolithic railing at Sarnath is assigned to the Mauryan period. It is made of polished Chunar sand stone. It compares well with the Bharhut railing. It is copied from wooden contemporary originals. The plinth or the ‘*alambana*’, the uprights or the ‘*stambhas*’, the horizontal bars or the ‘*suchis*’ and the coping stone or the ‘*ushnisha*’ have all been carved from a single monolithic stone.



### Dhauli Elephant

At Dhauli (Bhubaneswara, Odisha), there is a rock sculpture of the front part of an elephant. It has a heavy trunk which curls gracefully inwards. His right front leg is slightly tilted and the left one slightly bent, suggesting forward movement. Its naturalistic stance, powerful portrayal in stone is very impressive and gives the feeling that the elephant is walking out of the rock.

### Rock Cut Caves

The Mauryan period saw the beginning of rock cut architecture. The caves are located in the Nagarjuni and Barabar hills to the north of Bodhgaya. Three caves in Barabar hills have dedicatory inscriptions of Ashoka and three in the Nagarjuni hills have inscriptions of his successor Dasaratha. The exteriors of the caves are very plain. However, the interiors are polished to a high degree. The earliest of these caves is Sudama cave which contains an inscription dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> regnal year of Ashoka and is dedicated to the Ajivika sect. It consists of two chambers: (a) a rectangular ante-chamber with a barrel-vaulted roof, doorway with sloping jambs, (b) a separate circular cell at the end of the hall, with a hemispherical domed roof. The latter on the outside is a copy of thatched straw roof.



**Fig.17.2: Lomas Rishi Entrance.** Credit: Photo Dharma from Penang, Malaysia Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lomas\\_Rishi\\_relief.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lomas_Rishi_relief.jpg))

Chronologically the latest and architecturally the best specimen is the Lomas Rishi cave (figure 17.2) which in ground plan and general design is similar to Sudama cave. It consists of an ante-chamber with a barrel-vaulted roof, having a doorway with sloping jambs. The antechamber has an oval cell at the end. The most conspicuous feature is the sculptural ornamentation of a relief carving on the doorway. Over the doorway is depicted a *chaitya* or a *gavaksha* arch with a carved finial. There are two bands of relief carvings; the upper one has a lattice work design and the lower one has a finely carved frieze showing elephants approaching stupas. At both ends of the frieze is a *makara* (a mythical crocodile).

The Maurya art is thus a continuation of a long movement in art in the South Asian region. They were undoubtedly the result of a royal initiative, but the flowering was very much rooted in the Indian soil. The columns, the caves, designs all represent the copying in stone of wooden prototypes.

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## 17.6 DISINTEGRATION OF THE EMPIRE

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Mauryan rule was the first experiment in imperial government in India. The imperial authority of the Mauryas began to weaken with the death of Ashoka (232 BCE) and finally collapsed in 180 BCE. Let us study the reasons for its decline.

### 17.6.1 Successors of Ashoka

It is generally believed that Ashoka died in 232 BCE. However, the Mauryan rulers continued to rule for about half a century after his death. Several literary texts like the *Puranas*, the *Avadanas* and the Jain accounts give different details of Ashoka's successors. It is suggested that after the death of Ashoka the empire was divided among the surviving sons. Some of the names of Ashoka's successors that we find in different texts are: Kunala, Dasharatha, Samprati, Salishuka, Devavarman, Satadhanvan and Brihadratha. However, it is difficult to ascertain their exact period. But it appears that after Ashoka the empire got fragmented and that there was a quick succession of rulers. This weakened the imperial control over administration. The early three kings, Chandragupta, Bindusara and Ashoka, had organised the administration in such a way that it needed strict supervision. The quick succession of kings made this difficult as none of the rulers could actually settle down and be in the control of things. Linked to this is the fact that dynastic empires depend much on the ability of its rulers. But the successors of Ashoka failed in this respect. Each one of them ruled only for a short period of time and therefore could not formulate either new policies of governance or maintain the old ones. The partition of the empire is in itself enough to show that the process of disintegration had begun immediately after the death of Ashoka.

### 17.6.2 Other Political Factors for Disintegration

The disorder that emerged in the administrative machinery after the death of Ashoka is regarded as one of the important factors for the disintegration of the Mauryan empire. The immediate problem for Ashoka's successors was whether to continue his policy of *Dhamma* and its predominance in the government. It is not clear whether despite Ashoka's personal exhortations his successors attached the same kind of importance to *Dhamma*, as he himself had done. Another related feature of the political importance of *Dhamma* was the existence of a large body of officials of the State called *Dhamma-mahamattas*. It has been suggested by some historians that they had become very powerful and oppressive during the latter half of Ashoka's reign. Since these functionaries were ultimately held together by a power structure with the king at its centre, once the king became weak, the whole administration naturally weakened. Once the centre became weak, the provinces too started breaking away.

The officials of the State were personally selected by the king and owed loyalty only to him. Once weak rulers came, and ruled for short durations of time, it resulted in an overwhelming number of new officials constantly emerging and owing only personal loyalty to their respective kings and not to the State. The provincial governments under the later Mauryas thus increasingly began to question the Centre's authority.

Though one cannot accept the notion that there were popular uprisings wrecking Mauryan State control, one can strongly suggest that the social basis of the Mauryan bureaucracy was under stress and strain resulting in an inefficient administration unable to maintain social order in general. The complex system of spies under the later Mauryas collapsed. There were thus no means through which the kings could either gauge the public opinion in the empire, or, check on the corruption which had inevitably set in once weak rulers were in power at the centre. At this stage we need to emphatically state that the decline of the Magadhan empire cannot satisfactorily be explained by merely stating that there were weak successors or, that there was military inactivity or, that there were popular uprisings. Each of these was in fact, fundamentally linked to the particular nature of the Mauryan imperial bureaucratic set-up and once this started cracking up the whole political structure was at stake.

### 17.6.3 Ashoka and his Policies

Many scholars have opined that either Ashoka's political decisions or the effects of these decisions were responsible for the disintegration of the Mauryan Empire.

- 1) First, there are those scholars who maintain that Pushyamitra Sunga, who killed the last Mauryan emperor, represented a strong Brahmanical reaction against the pro-Buddhist policy of Ashoka and the pro-Jain policy of some of his successors. They suggest that the *Dhamma-mahamattas*, as special officers of *Dhamma* appointed by Ashoka, destroyed the prestige of the brahmanas. These officials disallowed brahmanas to continue their traditional laws of punishment and other *Smriti* injunctions.

However, there are no direct evidences to support the above arguments. For example, the Ashokan inscriptions clearly say that the *Dhamma-mahamattas* were to respect the brahmanas and the *sramanas* alike. It is, however, possible that in the later years these officials may have become unpopular among the people. Thus, to argue that the interests of the brahmanas were harmed by Ashoka's policy and that Pushyamitra, a brahmana general engineered a revolt cannot be accepted for the simple reason that if Ashoka's policies were so harmful, this should have happened immediately after his death.

- 2) According to another group of scholars emphasis should be given to Ashoka's pacifist policies as a factor for Mauryan decline. This explanation focuses on Ashoka's policy of *ahimsa* or non-violence. Non-violence on the part of the king also meant that he no longer exerted his control over officials particularly in the provinces who had become oppressive and ought to have been controlled.

The above image of Ashoka is far from correct. It is true that Ashoka believed in non-violence as vital to *Dhamma*. There was however, no extreme stand on this issue. A dislike for killing of animals for food and sacrifice did not in fact terminate the policy of the palace to continue killing animals for food, though on a reduced scale. Also, in governance and criminal justice, death penalty should have been done away with, but this was not so. Further, we have no evidence of the army having been demobilized, nor, even a hint in the inscriptions to such a policy being intended. The evidence one has is that of only one campaign conducted against Kalinga which had ended in a ruthless defeat of the latter. Had Ashoka

been such a pacifist he should have reinstated Kalinga as an independent kingdom but, as a practical ruler, he maintained the supremacy of Magadha over it. There are innumerable other indications of Ashoka's assertion of his control over the different people of his empire, particularly his warning to the tribes. He had made it very clear that the misconduct of the tribes living within his empire would be tolerated up to a point only and not beyond that. All these steps were taken by Ashoka to see that the empire was kept secure.

Thus, to conclude, the policy of *ahimsa* in no way weakened the army and administrative machinery of the Mauryan empire. Pushyamitra Sunga was after all a general of the Mauryan army and even half a century after Ashoka he is said to have prevented the Greeks from entering Madhyadesa. According to Romila Thapar even an entire generation of pacificism cannot weaken an empire and lead to its disintegration: 'Battles and territorial acquisition are not alone responsible for the creation and destruction of empires. The causes must be sought in other directions as well'.

#### 17.6.4 Economic Problems

D.D. Kosambi stressed on the economic problems that the Mauryas faced. He indicated that there were financial constraints on the Mauryan economy:

- a) the State took excessive measures to increase the taxes on a variety of things,
- b) and, that the punch-marked coins of this period show evidence of debasement of the currency.

The latter argument is based on his statistical analysis of the punch-marked coins of the period. Some of Kosambi's views which have now generally been accepted as crucial factors in bringing about major changes in the Magadhan empire and thereby, its ultimate decline are briefly as follows:

- 1) It is suggested that gradually the State monopoly of metals was being lost. The demands on iron, so crucial for the expanding agrarian economy, could no longer be met by Magadha alone. In fact, there were attempts to locate and develop new sources of it in the Deccan. Though such pockets of iron ore were found in Andhra and Karnataka, the Magadha State found it a costly operation to tap these pockets. Of the many problems they faced in this connection was also the protection of the mining areas from intrusion by the local chiefs.
- 2) The other point which is stressed is that expansion in cultivation, extensive use of forest wood and deforestation in general may have led to floods and famines. There is in fact evidence of a big famine in north Bengal during the Mauryan period. Thus, many factors may have combined to bring down drastically the amount of State revenue.

In a centralized administrative system, the problem of not having enough revenues created many other acute difficulties. To enhance the revenues, the *Arthashastra* suggested that taxes should be imposed even on actors, prostitutes and so on. The tendency to tax everything that could be taxed, emerged out of the necessity of the treasury needing more funds or, the currency having become debased due to inflation. The *Arthashastra's* measures to be adopted in times of emergency are interpreted in this light. Further, the decreasing silver content of the punch-

marked coins attributed to the later Mauryan rulers indicate that debasement had actually taken place to meet the needs of a depleted treasury. The burden of expenditure had also increased. This can be seen in the large amounts of money spent under Ashoka for public works. Also, his tours and those of his officials meant using up the surplus wherever it was available. The earlier stringent measures of the State's control on its finances had thus begun to change even during Ashoka's reign.

Romila Thapar has further commented on these issues. According to her the debasement of coins need not necessarily have meant a pressure on the general economy. In fact, it is difficult to say precisely when and where the debasement of coinage took place. In positive terms she argues that for many parts of the Indian subcontinent the general picture of the economy on the basis of the material evidence in fact indicates an improvement. This is particularly seen in the use of better-quality materials which indicates a technical advance. There may have been debasement of coinage but in her opinion, it was not because of a decline in material standards, but rather, because of extreme political confusion, particularly in the Ganges valley. This must have led to hoarding of money by merchant classes and debasement of coinage. However, she concludes: 'There is no doubt of the economic prosperity that prevailed with the political decline of the Mauryan empire'.

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## 17.7 GROWTH OF LOCAL POLITIES IN POST MAURYAN PERIOD

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The Mauryas in fact, had directly governed only the major and vital areas of the empire, the centre of which was Magadha. It is most probable that its governors/officials administering the core areas were selected from amongst the local peoples. These officials were often very powerful and acted as a check on the Viceroy or representative of the kings. As mentioned earlier, the political loyalty of these officials was crucial for the imperial structure to continue. A change of king meant a re-alignment of these loyalties. If this happened often, as it did in the post-Ashokan period, fundamental weaknesses would begin to inevitably creep in and prove the system unsuccessful. The half a dozen kings that had succeeded Ashoka had made no basic change in the policy of governance adopted by the first three Mauryas. It has also been suggested that some of these kings probably ruled more or less concurrently over several parts of the empire. This indicates a segmentation of the empire even under the Mauryas.

Whereas, on the one hand, the political decline of the Mauryas created a situation for many of the local powers to rise, on the other, the economic expansion witnessed in the Mauryan period continued unabated. The crisis in the Magadhan empire under the Mauryas was thus one of organisation and control of its resources and not a lack of them.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) What are the main features of Mauryan art?

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2) Was Ashoka’s pacifist policy responsible for the decline of the Mauryan kingdom? If not, what reasons have been forwarded for the decline?

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- 3) State whether the following statements are True (✓) or False (x)
- a) The policy of *Dhamma* was an attempt at founding a new religion. ( )
  - b) *Dhamma* preached total non-violence. ( )
  - c) The Sarnath column is crowned by a four-Lion capital. ( )
  - d) Pushyamitra Sunga was probably a governor of Ujjain under the Mauryas. ( )

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## 17.8 SUMMARY

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Our sources of information about Ashoka’s *Dhamma* are his inscriptions on the basis of which we can say that Ashoka preached non violence, toleration and social responsibility. It has to be noted that *Dhamma* cannot be equated with Buddhism. It was a set of principles gleaned from various religious traditions and was implemented to hold the empire together.

Mauryan art was an imperial art. It flowered under the patronage of Ashoka. Whether it was influenced by Achaemenid art traditions or was a product of a long indigenous movement that began in the Vedic age is a question which has been debated by scholars.

Regarding the disintegration of the Mauryan empire, various factors can be considered important. The successors of Ashoka failed to maintain the integrity of the empire which they inherited from Ashoka. More importantly the inherent contradictions in the imperial set up accentuated the crisis. The highly centralised polity with its loyalty to the king and not to the State made the administration completely individual based. And the change of king meant the change of officials and this had a very adverse effect on administration after Ashoka.

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## 17.9 KEY WORDS

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- Anusamyana** : Ashoka refers in his Major Rock Edict II to *anusamyana* or ‘tours of inspection’ which some categories of officials had to undertake once every five years for expounding the *Dhamma* and for official work.
- Commercial classes** : Section of the society engaged in the activity of trade and exchange as distinct from those who are engaged in activities of production.
- Dhammayatras** : Ashoka’s predecessors used to take *vihara-yatras*

for hunting and other royal pleasures. After his visit to Bodhgaya, Ashoka gave up *vihara-yatras* and took up *Dhammayatras*. *Dhammayatras* or 'excursions of *Dhamma*' gave him opportunities to expound *Dhamma* and come into direct contact with different sections of the people.

<b>Eclectic</b>	: Borrowing freely from diverse ideas and philosophies.
<b>Erring</b>	: Those straying from the right path.
<b>Pacifist</b>	: Opposed to war or one who believes that all war is wrong.
<b>Polities</b>	: Forms of political organization, some could be monarchical or republican or tribal.

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## 17.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 17.2 and its relevant Sub-sections
- 2) See Section 17.4 and its relevant Sub-sections.
- 3) See Sub-section 17.4.4

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 17.5
- 2) See Section 17.6 and its relevant Sub-sections
- 3) a) ×, b) ×, c) ✓, d) ✓

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## 17.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## UNIT 18 ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY\*

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### Structure

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### 18.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- the attitudes towards conservation and preservation of environment in ancient India;
- the various developments and achievements in the fields of Indian mathematics, astronomy, medicine, engineering, building, metallurgy in the past; and
- hydraulic engineering skills of ancient Indians.

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### 18.1 INTRODUCTION

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Human interaction with environment has been continuous since the time man set foot on earth. In this section we will be discussing human relationship with nature/ environment and its validation by available resources of knowledge and society's cumulative wisdom. Later in this Unit we will be learning about the achievements in science and technology that ancient Indians accomplished. The time period is from the earliest times to 200 BCE.

Since the beginning, concern for environment has been an integral part of the Indian intellectual and popular traditions. This sensibility was not developed as a result of contact and borrowings from the west but came into existence

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indigenously. It is apparent in the cultural patterns, religious practices, and social norms. The wisdom embodied in the popular and the classical traditions focussed on the preservation and conservation of environment.

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## 18.2 INDIAN PHILOSOPHY AND ITS VISION OF ENVIRONMENT

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In ancient Indian philosophical traditions, a harmonious relationship with environment was advocated. The environment was perceived as an organic living entity. It was acknowledged that man was the most intelligent of all creatures. Man was understood as being a small part of the environment. Upon his death, he dissolved into it. On a physical plane, man had a close relationship with all the living and non living beings. On a spiritual plane, man had to abide by a set of rules of conduct which specified the duties and obligations towards other living species. There was an acknowledgement of the fact that environment should not be endangered and destroyed.

Ancient Indian thought conceived of the relationship with nature in terms of balance and cooperation. In Indian thought the universe is conceived of as *Srsti*. It denoted the entire universe comprising *Pasu*, *Pakshi* and *Vanaspati*. The creation of *srsti* was traced to *Hiranyagarbha*, the golden egg, which finally led to Creation. Since both humans and *srsti* were created through the agency of God, both were required to maintain cordial relations with each other.

Earth and all that it entailed were regarded with utmost respect and reverence. The Earth, last of the *Panch Tattva* (sky, water, air, fire and earth), was treated as the mother of all living beings. It is said that she should be worshipped as it bore the material base of man's sustenance. In the *Vedas*, prayers were offered for the continuance of earth's resources and its bounties. It is said that they were not the sole belonging of the humans but were meant to be shared by all.

Ancient Indian wisdom treated all living beings with respect. Animals and birds were attributed with special powers and intelligence. They had the power to predict future, climatic or atmospheric changes and ability to foretell good or bad events. Killing of animals was prohibited and it was believed that doing so was a crime. This respect for animals and the fact that animals were sacrosanct is evident from the way certain animals were made the *vahanas* of individual gods and goddesses. They were as much worthy of worship as the Gods themselves. For example, Indra rode an elephant, Siva had bull as his *vahana*, Saraswati travelled on swan, Ganesha sat on a mouse and Visnu preferred Garuda. Even kings in the past acknowledged that non killing of animals was an important aspect of the policy of *ahimsa* and should be abided by. For instance, in the fifth Pillar edict, Ashoka outlined his policy of non-violence with respect to animals. In the list of animals which were prohibited from killing were parrots, mainas, red-headed ducks, akravaka-geese, swans, nandi-mukhas, pigeons, bats, ants, tortoises, boneless fish, goats, sows and many more animals. This edict may be taken as one of the earliest historical records focussing on conservation practices to be followed by people in general. (Mayank Kumar, MHI-08, Block 5, Unit 16, p. 24-25).

If we trace this benevolent attitude towards nature to an earlier time, we find that in the *Rigvedic* period different elements of nature were personified by the sages

and worshipped. They prayed for blessings from the Sun, Agni, Earth etc. Songs of praise or 'rik' were chanted in their glory.

How nature was thought as one with divinity is best exemplified by the figure of Nataraja or Dancing Siva. 'His emblems are Agni and deer. His locks are the forests. He hides within himself Ganga. His hair adorns the sun and the moon. His garlands are the snakes. He wears the tiger skin. He brings to this world the cosmic rhythm of his *damaru* in the incessant process of cyclic creation, degeneration and regeneration and finally of enlightenment. His energy is Sakti. Without her he is incomplete. She herself, the daughter of the Himalayas, must undergo penance and austerities" (Mayank Kumar, MHI-08, Block 5, Unit 15 Pg. 17)

Thus, ancient thought conceived of everything — animate and inanimate, human and non human, as part of a whole. All beings were incomplete without the other. This kind of wisdom required everything to be respected and protected for the universe to function in an orderly fashion.

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### 18.3 POLLUTION (*PRADUSHANA*) IN TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

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The violation of the peaceful coexistence among the creatures and the material world was considered as *pradushan*. Non-adherence to norms of cleanliness, and violation of *maryada* led to pollution. The cause of pollution was human greed and selfishness. Polluted *Srsti* had been described in the following terms,

*"It seems that all stars, planets, moon, sun, air, agni and nature of directions have been polluted. Seasons also appear to work against the nature, Prithvi in spite of being full of virtues has lost its rasa in all medicinal plants. When such pollution will occur, human beings will suffer from diseases. Due to pollution of seasons, several types of diseases will crop up and they will ruin the country. Therefore, collect the medicinal plants before the beginning of terrible disease and change the nature of Prithvi"*.

(*Charaka Samhita*, Vimansthan, 3.2 as cited in MHI-08, Block 5, Unit 15, p.18)

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### 18.4 DEIFICATION OF NATURE

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Indian civilization has always respected nature and environmental diversity. In Indian consideration, environment is not a physical and lifeless being, but a very living and active mechanism and human beings are just one among the various other creatures that inhabit the earth. Through deification of nature, ancient Indians were successful in inculcating respect for environment. This is best exemplified through the example of sacred groves. Sacred groves or *Deo-rahati* from time immemorial have been established to venerate local, indigenous deities. They have been in existence since the Vedic period. Today the number of sacred groves has declined. Some are still preserved though. However, in ancient times, sacred groves were maintained by a large number of cities. The cities of Champa, Kushinagara and Vaishali had sacred groves.

In ancient literature of India, we come across various categories of forests. One is *Aranyaka* in which ancient sages lived peacefully. A special part of the forest

which was reserved for meditation was called *Tapovana*. Both *aranyaka* and *tapovana* were *abhayaranya* or sanctuaries which were visited by kings, princes, and commoners to seek the wisdom, blessings and guidance of the sages. Not only forests but also pools, ponds and rivers were considered sacred and worshipped by the ancients. Even today, such symbols of nature are considered to be sacred remnants of the past.

There was an inherent concern for forests and other forms of life in ancient India. There is a text called *Vrikshayurveda* by Parashara dated to 400 BCE which is devoted to the science of plants. It is noteworthy that such kind of specialized knowledge existed in the ancient past. It mentions different types of forests such as *atavi*, *bipana*, *gahana*, *kanana*, *vana*, *maharanya*, and *aranyani*. The classification of forests was also done according to regions. Thus, there was a desire to learn about forests as well as an acknowledgement of the fact that forests played an important role in the day-to-day lives of the people. Information was systematically gathered and classified which shows that not only the *janapada* but also the *aranya* associated with it formed an important component of daily life.

Indians had a deep association with nature right from the very beginning. Nearly all the rituals and ceremonies concerned with various stages of one's life underline the intimate relationship with fire, wood and water. The ancient literature of India, the *Vedas* talk about the sanctity of rivers, mountains and the earth. The *Dharmasutras* extol the virtues of being kind towards one and all. Additionally, there are many texts which speak of the joyous harmonious relationship with nature. Ancient Indian wisdom as encapsulated in texts approached the sanctity of life in all forms in various ways. Destruction of animal and plant life brought up images of doomsday. It was said that after the passing of the *Treta Yuga* the people would exert all possessing power over rivers, fields, mountains, clumps of trees and shrubs. The fourth eon would even be worse. All living entities like plants, trees and animals would be killed. The *dharma* would decline. The death of *Dharma* (from *dhr*, which means that which sustains; righteousness, justice, duty) would take place when the nature was despoiled (Narayanan, Vasudha, p. 181).

In most Hindu traditions, the earth is considered sacred. She is addressed as *Bhu*, *Bhumi*, *Prthvi*, *Vasudha*, *Vasundhara*, *Avni*. She is worshipped along with Lord Vishnu as his consort. It is said in Manusmriti that, “*Impure objects like urine, faeces, spit; or anything which has these elements or poison should not be cast into water*” (Manusmriti 4: 56, as cited in Narayanan, 2001).

*Prakriti* (nature) just does not personify nature but also stands for cosmic matter. It possesses divine power and along with *purusha* is responsible for creation. All the constituent elements of nature such as water, earth, fire, ether/space and air are considered sacred.

Trees have been attributed a place of reverence in the Indian tradition. It is part of *Vanaspati* and equivalent to humans. Ancient wisdom believed that every tree had a *Vriksh Devata*. It was offered water in the morning which ensured continuous care of the trees. In *Narasimha Purana* tree was personified as God (Brahma) itself. Atharvaveda considered *Peepal* tree as abode of various Gods. Various trees and their association with Gods and Goddesses are:

India: 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to 200 BCE

Asoka tree	Buddha, Indra, Visnu, Aditi
Peepal	Vishnu, Laxmi, Vana Durga
Tulsi	Visnu, Krishna, Jagannath, Laxmi
Kadamba	Krisna
Ber	Shiva, Durga, Surya, Lakshmi
Vata	Brahma, Visnu, Shiv, Kal, Kubera, Krishna

(Mayank Kumar , MHI 08, Block 5, Unit 16, p. 24)

In *Matsya Purana* there is a passage where Parvati gives instruction about the planting of trees. Once Parvati plants an Ashoka sapling and takes great care of it. The Gods and divine beings come to her and say—

*“O Goddess! ... almost everyone wants children. When people see their children and grandchildren, they feel they have been successful. What do you achieve by creating and rearing trees like sons...?”*  
*Parvati replied: “One who digs a well where there is little water lives in heaven for as many years as there are drops of water in it. One large reservoir of water is worth ten wells. One son is like ten reservoirs and one tree is equal to ten sons (dasa putra samo druma). This is my standard and I will protect the universe to safeguard it...”*

(*Matsya Puranam*, chap. 154, 506-512. Adopted from Narayana, Vasudha, 2001, pp. 187)

Repeatedly, it is mentioned in the texts that trees and especially fruit trees are sacrosanct and great misfortune befalls those who destroy them. For example, in the *Ramayana*, when faced with calamity, the demon king Ravana speaks as follows, “...I have not cut down any Fig tree in the month of Vaisakh, why does this calamity befall me”.

Extolling the virtues of trees, *Vishnu Purana* says that one who plants five mango trees does not go to hell and *Vishnu Dharmottara* says that one who plants a tree does not fall into hell. The *Dharmasutras* as well as Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* condemn the felling of trees. Kautilya prescribes varying levels of punishment for those who destroy trees, groves and forests. The different grades of punishments as described below show how destruction of natural flora was considered to be a crime. Kautilya says that for cutting off the tender sprouts of fruit trees or flower trees or shady trees in the parks near a city, a fine of 6 *panas* shall be imposed; for cutting off the minor branches of the same trees, 12 *panas*, and for cutting off the big branches, 24 *panas* shall be levied. Cutting off the trunks of the same shall be punished with a fine between 48-96 *panas*; and felling of the same shall be punished with a fine between 200-500 *panas*. For similar offenses committed in connection with the trees which mark boundaries, or which are worshipped, double the above fines shall be levied (Kautilya *Arthashastra* as cited in Narayanan, Vasudha, 2001, p. 188).

The *Arthashastra* suggests the need to develop *Abhayaranya* or *Abhayavana* which were forest or animal sanctuaries where trees and animals would reside free from the fear of slaughter. There was also a Forest Superintendent who took care of the forests and penalties were prescribed for poaching and killing of

animals. Capital punishment was prescribed for those who entrapped, killed or molested elephants, deer, bison, birds, fish, amongst other animals.

Rivers in India are also considered sacred. They are believed to wash away the sins or *papa* of those who take a dip in their waters. The rivers of India are considered nurturing and life giving. In south India, in the plains of Tamilnadu, the river Kaveri after the monsoons is perceived as having become pregnant and tradition says that locals offer her food in order to satisfy her pregnancy food cravings (*macakkai*). According to an oral tradition and local *Sthala Puranas*, bathing in the river Kaveri during Tamil month of Aippasi, October 15- November 14, washes away one's sins and gives a human being supreme liberation.

The close relationship people have with nature in the past and even today is exemplified by the fact that coconut tree is worshipped, coconut fruit is considered auspicious; mango leaves are used as festoons during *yajna* sacrifices or during ritual occasions; mango tree and its wood is used as *samidha* in *yajna*; Lotus and the Tulsi plant are considered ritually pure.

*Manusmriti*, a treatise on jurisprudence according to Sayan Bhattacharya, encapsulates in certain sections a reflection of ecological awareness (2014: 37)

- 1) All living forms are broadly described as *Chara* (movable living world) and *Achara* (immovable: plant kingdom), thus representing a notion of biodiversity.
- 2) The spoilage of the five gross elements by unethical activity may be taken to mean pollution.
- 3) Any action against wholesomeness (*Soucha*) may be taken to mean contamination.
- 4) Storage organs of plants like tuberous roots and underground stems, leafy vegetables, beautiful flowers, tasteful fruits, timber yielding trees, crops etc. were considered precious and various punishments are prescribed for causing injury to these.
- 5) Importance was given for conserving and domesticating animals, biodiversity protection, and vegetarianism. According to Manu, agriculture caused injury to animals, specially the insects and germs in the soil.
- 6) For biodiversity protection, he mentioned that fishes of all types should not be killed for food purpose; one hoofed animals, village pigs, solitary moving animals and unknown beasts should be protected; carnivorous birds, birds of village habitat, web footed birds, diving birds feeding on fishes, birds with striking beaks should not be killed for the purpose of eating. He stated that killing of *Khara* (ass), *asva* (horse), *ustra* (camel), *mrga* (deer), *ibha* (elephant), *aja* (goat), *ahi* (snake), *ahisa* (buffalo) is a sin.

Thus, the ancient Indian tradition took care of nature and environment. In fact, the ancient way of living encapsulated living harmoniously with nature. This beautiful eco-balance was disrupted only with the coming of the British in India. Today, we feel the relevance of such ties more than ever before.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

- 1) Give some examples from the ancient Indian texts which show ancient Indian’s concern for the environment.

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- 2) Give some instances which show that Indians deified nature. How did it lead to conservation of nature?

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**18.5 SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN ANCIENT INDIA**

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India, right from the earliest period had achieved immense heights in the field of science and technology. In this part of the Unit we will be learning about the various facets of Indian science and technology from the earliest period.

**18.5.1 Hydrology in Ancient India**

In past, hydraulic techniques were introduced by the political authority and even by the locals in order to meet the needs of agriculture. They represent highly advanced techniques of water harvesting and these indigenous methods are valued even today.

The availability of water resources usually guided the location of habitation in the past. In those areas where there were scarce water bodies all efforts were made with the help of science and technology to harness the meagre resources available to humankind. Many advances were made in the field of hydraulic engineering.

*Harappan Civilization*

The Indus Valley civilization is the earliest civilized, urban culture that has survived in the Indian subcontinent. Its various features indicate the high level of technology that was implemented by the Harappan people. One example is the Great Bath which has been found from Mohenjodaro. It is a tank which was accessed by steps on both sides. The side walls and the base of the tank were made waterproof through the use of gypsum mixed in the mortar material. The sides were double walled and the intervening space between the walls was filled with bitumen coating and earth filling to ensure total waterproofing. The tank was connected with a well which supplied water to it. The well was situated in

one of the rooms fronting the open courtyard of the building complex. Used water was carried away by a corbelled baked brick drain in the south western portion. The way the tank had been constructed and the techniques used for water proofing indicate high level of hydraulic engineering skills.

At Lothal a Dockyard has been unearthed. It is a testimony to the engineering skill of the Harappans. This dockyard is the first ever artificial basin constructed for sluicing ships at high tide. It surpasses the docks made by the Romans and Phoenecians in conception. Its embankment walls measure 212.4 m. on the west, 36.4 m. on the north, 209.3 m. on the east, and 34.7 m. on the south. It is a lined structure with evidence for channels for inlet and outlet of water. Towards the southern part of the eastern wall of this dockyard is a 7 m wide gap which functioned as a spill channel. This connected the Lothal Dockyard with the Bhogavo river and thence to the Gulf of Cambay. The entire structure has been made in such a way that during high tide, water would swell the channel's natural flow and push the extra water upstream. The boats used the high tide to dock at the yard. The boats made a return journey when the tide ebbed. Extra water was discharged through a water spill channel which was built in the southern wall of the dockyard. A wooden sluice fitted across the spill channel was used to regulate the water flow. The wharf, measuring 260 m. ran along the western wall of the dock. From the wharf goods could be taken to the warehouse adjacent to it. The warehouse had a floor area of 1,930 sq. m., larger than the granaries of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The structure stood on a 4- metre high platform on which were raised sixty- four blocks of mud bricks, each block 3.6 m. square and 1 m. high. The blocks were interspersed with 1- metre wide passages to allow ventilation and easy access to the goods. On top of the blocks a superstructure of timber was raised.

Similarly, at Dholavira, in the Rann of Kutch, various rock cut reservoirs were constructed to harvest rain water. Dholavira is located in an area which faced acute scarcity of water. The Harappans devised very ingenious methods to divert the rain water that flowed into the two rivers close to the settlement of Dholavira to some 16 reservoirs for later use. The two seasonal rivulets called Manhar and Mandasar were used to collect rain water from the catchment areas. Stone bunds were erected across the rivers at suitable points to dam up the water. The monsoon runoff was carried to the reservoirs, excavated in the rocky sloping areas between the inner and the outer walls of the settlement, with the help of inlet channels. These water reservoirs were separated from each other by bund-cum-causeways which also facilitated access to the different divisions of the settlement. Besides this, storm water collection drains were made criss- crossing the citadel area. These drains were made of stone and brick and were not used for sullage at all but to collect the rain water. Similarly, house drains were linked to soak-pits in Dholavira. Thus, every effort was made to harvest rain water judiciously with the help of technology.

Water management at other Harappan sites of Kalibangan, Surkotada, Chanhudaro also reveal the application of scientific techniques to everyday purpose. Wells both public and private have been found. The drains from well constructed bathrooms were connected to drains in the streets which were provided with manholes at regular intervals for easy cleaning. The drains were constructed with kiln baked bricks and covered with tiles. This shows that the drainage and sewerage system at Harappan sites was of a most developed kind and became a defining feature of this urban, highly advanced civilization.

Various dynasties are known for having constructed irrigation channels, reservoirs, embankments and wells for the purposes of water harvesting. The Mauryan rulers not only dug wells for public use alongside roads but also document the construction of irrigation devices for newly settled villages. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is known for giving details about irrigation techniques, rainfall regimes and water harvesting methods.

A tank constructed at the site of Sringaverapura near Allahabad of 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, is a remarkable example of hydraulic engineering. It is a huge tank more than 250m long. It has been built by damming the river Ganga which, during the monsoon period spills into an adjoining stream (*nallah*) from where 11m wide and 5m deep canal carries water to this tank. But first the water is channelled to a settling chamber where all the silt and debris collects at the bottom and the clean water then fills up the tank. This water is used for ritual and bathing purposes. The tank never goes dry because of underground wells at the base which draw water from ground level. Here mention may be made of another reservoir which was an impressive edifice called the Sudarshana lake. It is dated to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and was located in Girnar area of Gujarat. This was first excavated by a functionary called Pusyagupta during the reign of emperor Chandragupta Maurya. During the reign of Ashoka, supplementary channels were added by Yavanraja Tushaspha. After a span of four centuries, the lake was repaired by the Shaka king, Mahakshatrapa Rudradaman of Ujjain. This has been recorded in the Junagadh Inscription of the Girnar of 150 CE. The lake continued to exist even in later times as attested by an inscription of 455 CE of the reign of Skanda Gupta. The record mentions local city governor Chakrapalit, son of Skanda Gupta's provincial governor, Parnadatta, who repaired the lake when the embankment broke. During this time the lake's embankment at the base was a huge 100 ft thick. The lake finally breached in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE after which it was not repaired. From the lake, water was lifted by counterpoised 'sweeps' or other devices and fed into smaller channels.

### 18.5.2 Mathematics

In the field of science and Mathematics, the ancient people of India acquired a good measure of command. The two subjects which developed as a result of the Vedic people's interest in sacrifices were geometry and astronomy. The altar where the sacrifice was to be performed was to be of prescribed size and shape. That is how the science of geometry originated. The study of astronomy developed out of the need to fix the proper time for sacrifice. The term *ganita*, which means the science of calculation, occurs in the Vedic literature. The *Chandogya Upanisad* mentions among other sciences, the science of numbers. *Ganita* at this time included astronomy, arithmetic and algebra, but not geometry. Geometry then belonged to a different group of sciences known as *kalpa*. In India, in the post Vedic period, bulk of mathematics developed as an adjunct to astronomy. This class of astronomical works are called *Siddhantas*. Just a few centuries before and after the Common Era mathematics developed to adequately express, describe and account for astronomical ideas and phenomena.

In early Jainism, the priests encouraged the development of mathematics. They devoted one of the four branches of *Anuyoga* (religious literature) to the elucidation of *ganitanuyoga* (mathematical principles), *samkhyana* (science of



calculation) and  *jyotisha*  (astronomy). A Jaina priest was supposed to have knowledge in all three. The ideas present in the mathematical works of  *Ganitasara-sangraha*  of Mahavira (850 CE) and  *Ganitatilaka*  of Sripati (999 CE) may be traced back to a passage in the  *Sthananga-sutra*  ( 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE). This passage enumerates:  *parikarma*  (fundamental operations),  *vyavahara*  (determination),  *rajju*  (geometry),  *kalasavarna*  (fraction),  *yavat-tavat*  (linear equation),  *varga*  (quadratic equation),  *ghana*  (cubic equation),  *vargavarga*  (biquadratic equation), and  *vikalpa*  (permutations and combinations). At this time  *ganita*  included all three branches — arithmetic, algebra, and geometry (Satpathy, B.B., not dated)

In the field of Arithmetic, the system with zero developed in India and then travelled to the other parts of the world. The Hindu term for zero-  *Sunya* , meaning –void, passed over into Arabic as  *sifr* . There is evidence to corroborate the existence of decimal place value notation with zero. In a Gwalior inscription of the reign of Bhojadeva verses are numbered from 1-26 in decimal figures. Not only this, but a circular symbol for zero also appears in this inscription.

Thus, Indian mathematics was very developed and complex with a variety of ideas from number theory to second-order algebraic equations and the concept of limiting value.

### 18.5.3 Astronomy

Though astronomy originated in the Vedic period, it's clear development as a separate science occurred in the  *Brahmanas* . It came to be called  *nakshatra vidya*  (science of stars). An astronomer was called  *nakshatra-daria*  (star observer) or  *ganaka*  (calculator).

According to the  *Rigveda* , the universe comprises  *prthivi*  (earth),  *antariksa*  (sky, literally meaning the region below the stars), and  *div*  or  *dyaus*  (heaven). The universe was deemed as infinite. According to  *Shatapatha Brahmana*  the earth is described as  *parimandala*  (globe or spherical).  *Rigveda*  mentions that the axial rotation and annual revolution are caused by the sun. There is only one Sun which causes day and night, twilight, month, year, seasons. It has seven rays which clearly are the seven colours of the Sun's rays. The  *Rigveda*  mentions the inclinations of the ecliptic with the equator and the axis of the earth.

The apparent annual course of the Sun is divided into two halves, the  *uttarayana*  when the Sun goes northwards and the  *daksinayana*  when it goes southwards. The sun is called by different names at the various parts of the zodiac, and thus has originated the doctrine of twelve  *adityas*  or suns. The  *Rigveda*  says that the moon shines by the borrowed light of the Sun.

Thus, although scientific Indian astronomy is dated much later than the time of Ptolemy, its constants and methods were all original. Indian astronomy was both accurate and pragmatic. They created the first sine and cosine tables and early trigonometry. Aryabhata's encyclopaedic work on astronomical calculations to Varahamihira's defining of syllabus for astronomy and clarification of various concepts, the achievements of Indian astronomical texts are astounding. Eclipse and planetary conjunctions:  *Mahurats* ,  *tithis* , calendar, eclipses, and planetary conjunctions were an important part of Indian astronomy and  *panchang* -making.

## 18.5.4 Medicine

*Ayurveda*, the traditional system of Indian medicine deals with both mind and body. This is evident from the word ‘*Ayurveda*’ itself. It is composed of two words — *dyus* and *veda*. *Dyus* means life and the latter knowledge or science. According to *Caraka Samhita*, *dyus* comprises *sukha* (happiness), *dukha* (sorrow), *hita* (good) and *anhita* (bad). A happy life is one which is free from physical and mental disease, full of vigour, strength and energy. Conversely, an unhappy life is full of sorrow and disease.

*Ayurveda* deals with the mental, physical and spiritual life of an individual in the course of his interaction with the environment. It has two streams — surgery and medicine. *Ayurveda* contains much that can be dated to the pre-Aryan or Aryan times. Its speculations, philosophy, logic and aetiology of diseases is said to have been borrowed from the Nyaya-Vaisesika and Sankhya philosophical schools. *Ayurveda* enjoys a high place along with the *Vedas*. It is called the *Upanga* of *Atharvaveda* and *Upaveda* associated with *Rigveda*. There is close similarity between the medical portions of the *Atharvaveda* and *Ayurveda*. The *Mahabharata* mentions that *Ayurveda* was composed by Krsnatreya.

The history of *Ayurveda* may be divided into:

- 1) The beginning period (*idevakala*)
- 2) The period of compilation (*rsikala* or *samhitakala*)
- 3) The period of epitomes (*sangraha-kala*)
- 4) The period of decline.

The early treatises of *Ayurveda* are lost. It included the *Brahma-samhita* composed of one lakh *Mokas*. These works are all lost. Important among them were the *Brahma-samhita*, *Prajapati-samhita*, *Alvi-samhita*, and *Balabhit-samhita*. During the time period of 500 BCE to 500 CE, various works related to *ayurveda* were compiled by founder writers. The eight parts of *Ayurveda* include *Kayacikitsa* (therapeutics), *Salya-tantra* (major surgery), *Salakya - tantra* (minor surgery), *Bhutavidya* (demonology), *Kaumarabhrtya-tantra* (pediatrics), *Agada - tantra* (toxicology), *Rasayana-tantra* (geriatrics), and *Vajikarana - tantra* (virilification).

*Ayurveda* had deep influence on Greek medicine and its concepts occur in Hippocratic manuals. The medical treatment of eye diseases of elephants referred to by Megasthenes (c. fourth century BCE) is found to have been based on ideas borrowed from the *Hastyayurveda* of Palakapya. Conversely, some ideas associated with Greek medicine might have been incorporated in *Ayurveda*. *Ayurvedic* texts were translated into Arabic and from Arabic to Persian. The *Susruta Samhita* was translated by an emigrant Indian physician

Some renowned *Ayurvedic* texts were translated into Arabic and from Arabic into Persian. The *Ayurvedic* concepts spread to Iran, Central Asia, Tibet, Indo-China, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

*Ayurveda* encapsulates a novel and holistic approach to health and wellness. It comprises of self discipline, exercise and plant-based medicine approach to health and illness. Its concepts are analytical, rational and practical. It has influenced modern day medicine too, especially in the field of plastic surgery.

## 18.5.5 Architecture

The earliest civilization of the Indian subcontinent, Harappan civilization, was of a most developed and urban kind. Its cities and towns such as Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Lothal, Kalibangan, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi boast of a detailed layout and well constructed roads and houses. They are witness to the highly developed technical skill of the ancient Indians. In terms of city construction, Mohenjodaro's largest buildings were more than 73m x34m in dimensions. The roads were well made and ran from north to south and east to west and cut each other at right angles in a chessboard pattern. The roads width varied from 10m. to 5.48 m. and some of the roads were paved.

The houses were spacious and well made. They were made of burnt bricks which were uniform in the ratio of 1:2:3 or 1:2:4. Many of the houses had more than one storey and as such they may have acquired the expertise in the principles of load distribution. A typical house consisted of a central courtyard besides a room containing a well, paved bathroom and a number of drains. A sewer pipe was laid below the floor meant to carry dirty water to the drains in the street. In a similar fashion, vertical pipes positioned vertically along the walls were meant to carry sewage from the upper floor. There was also a well-equipped system to draw water from the wells with a pulley.

At Kalibangan copper axes have been found which indicate that beginnings of copper metallurgy as early as 2450 BCE. The drainage system, roads, granaries, houses, weights and measures, seals all show a high degree of skill and mastery over material. The weights found at Mohenjodaro and Lothal are of cut and polished chert material. Finds of graduated scales made of shell at Mohenjodaro, of bronze rod at Harappa, and of ivory at Lothal indicate their knowledge of practical geometry and land surveying. The average distance between the successive divisions of the scales is 6.70 mm., 9.34 mm., and 1.70 mm. respectively. Terracotta plumb-bobs and an instrument made of shell for measuring angles of 45°, 90°, and 180° were also found at Lothal.

In the historical period, construction of religious buildings such as stupas and *caitya grhas* also indicate the technological skill of the Buddhists. Rock cut *caitya* or *vihara*'s design was first planned by a master craftsman or an architect. In choosing a suitable site he had to take into account such factors as the type of rock and whether it was free of faults, the existence of a suitable ledge from where the cave excavation could be started, and the proximity of spring or river water for drinking and bathing. Detailed plans must have been made since it was important to know the exact position and size of stone blocks to be left standing for the construction to proceed.

## 18.5.6 Developments in Metallurgy

The metallurgical tradition goes back 7000 years in India. India has a rich history of stone-working, agriculture, animal husbandry, pottery, metallurgy, textile manufacture, bead-making, wood-carving, cart- making, boat-making and sailing.

The first evidence of copper comes from the site of Mehrgarh in 6000 BCE in the form of a copper bead. However, this was a form of native copper and was not smelted out of an ore. It was after 1500 years that settlements started experimenting with the smelting of copper which a few centuries later developed

further with the Harappans. The Harappans obtained copper ore from the Aravalli hills, Baluchistan and beyond. They soon discovered that adding tin to copper produced bronze which was harder than copper but easier to cast. They also found that the impurities present in the ore such as nickel, arsenic and lead hardened bronze even more and it could be used to dress stones. Shaping copper or bronze involved techniques of fabrication such as forging, sinking, raising, cold work, annealing, riveting, lapping and joining. The Harappans produced spearheads, arrowheads, axes, chisels, sickles, blades (for knives as well as razors), needles, hooks, and vessels such as jars, pots and pans, besides objects of toiletry such as bronze mirrors; those were slightly oval, with their face raised, and one side was highly polished. The Harappan craftsmen also invented the true saw, with teeth and the adjoining part of the blade set alternatively from side to side, a type of saw unknown elsewhere until Roman times. Besides they have given us the famous 'Dancing girl', and figurines of animals like rams, deer, bulls etc made with the lost wax process.

Gold and silver ornaments have been found from Harappan site of Mohenjodaro (circa 3000 BCE). Gold was manufactured by panning alluvial sands from placer deposits. The ancient mines (carbon dates from 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE) of Maski in Karnataka are the deepest in the world. Herodotus mentions about the gold-digging ants from India. This could refer to the activities of marmot, a type of rodent found in Afghanistan, who digs up the river sand which could then have been panned for gold by the inhabitants. Surface tension was used to turn melted gold filings into spheres.

By the Later Vedic period use of iron was known in north India. Earlier, *Rigveda* mentions *ayas* which referred to copper or bronze. In the subsequent period, mention has been made of *krisnayas*, *kalayasa* or *syamayas* (dark metal) which clearly meant iron. The development of copper-bronze and iron metallurgy were independent developments in India. Two highly advanced forms of iron were manufactured in India. This indicates that in the field of innovation India was way ahead of other countries. Wootz steel goes back to 300 BCE in south India. It was iron carburized under controlled conditions. It was exported from the Deccan to Syria where it was shaped into Damascus swords which were known for their sharpness and toughness. The Indian steel was called 'the wonder material of the Orient'. According to a Roman historian, Quintius Curtius, Alexander the Great received from Porus of Taxila (in 326 BCE) the gift of two-and-a-half tons of wootz steel. Wootz steel was more prized than gold or jewels. Wootz steel is primarily iron containing a high proportion of carbon (1.0- 1.9%). Thus, the term wootz applies to a high-carbon alloy produced by crucible process.

India was the first country to master zinc distillation in the world. Zinc has a low boiling point and vaporises while its ore is smelted. Thus, it is the most difficult metal to smelt. It is a silvery white metal which in combination with copper results in the formation of valuable brass of superior quality. There is archaeological evidence for the production of zinc in the Zawar mines of Rajasthan of 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Ancient Indians had mastered the art of smelting zinc with the help of a sophisticated downward distillation technique in which vapour was captured and condensed in the lower container.

Ancient texts contain many references to metallurgical tradition of ancient India. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* refers to a department of mines. The Director of mines was supposed to have an intimate knowledge of different types of metal ores,

ways to test and purify metals, create alloys, familiar with metal veins in earth, art of colouring gems. He should be able to inspect an old mine by the marks of dross, crucibles, coal and ashes, or a new mine with excessive colour and heaviness and with a strong smell and taste.

The above discussion indicates that much before the Industrial Revolution of Europe, India had achieved expertise in the field of smelting various elements, metal technology and the science behind it. It was also ahead in many innovations.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Describe how mathematics was developed in ancient India.
- 2) Indicate *True* or *False*:
  - a) Awareness about the environment in ancient India began in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. ( )
  - b) Indian philosophy outlines environment ethics encouraging preservation, protection and conservation of nature. ( )
  - c) Ashoka has mentioned in his edicts about non killing of a number of animals. ( )
  - d) Trees were indiscriminately cut down in ancient India. ( )
  - e) Indians learnt everything about science and technology from the Greeks. ( )
  - f) In Indian mathematics Pythagorean triplets were borrowed from the west. ( )
  - g) Indian astronomy was faulty and incorrect. ( )
  - h) *Mahurats, tithis*, calendar, eclipses, and planetary conjunctions were an important part of Indian astronomy and *panchang*-making. ( )

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## 18.6 SUMMARY

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It is evident from the above discussion on environment that ancient Indians were very careful about the preservation of environment and its sustainability. The ancient literature of India which includes the *Vedas, Manusmriti, Ramayana, Mahabharata* and *Puranas* is replete with references which underline the deep significance environment had for humans. Ancient Indian texts like *Arthashastra, Sathapatha Brahamana, Vedas, Manusmrti, Brhat-Samhita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Rajatarangini* reflect the concepts of forest ecology and conservation in a sustainable manner.

In the field of science and technology, the ancient Indians had attained mastery over a number of arts. The Harappans fashioned huge cities like Mohenjodaro, Harappa and laid the foundations of the first urban civilization in the subcontinent. Their houses, drainage system, roads, ‘granaries’, dockyard, water tank etc are testimony to their engineering skills. The contributions of Aryabhata, iron and zinc smelters are so profound that they impress many with their ingenuity. Different fields like Mathematics, Astronomy, geography, medicine were flourishing in the past in which ancient Indians have contributed a great deal. In fact, ancient Indians along with the Greeks were the only civilizations that put high premium on science and technology.

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## 18.7 KEY WORDS

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- Ayurveda** : Literally ‘knowledge for longevity’.
- Harappan Civilization** : Also referred to as Indus Valley Civilization. It flourished in the Indo Gangetic divide and is dated to 2600-1800 BCE.
- Metallurgy** : It is the art and science of extracting metals from their ores and modifying the metals for use.
- Distillation** : It is a process where a mixture made of two or more components with different boiling points can be separated from each other.

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## 18.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 18.2 and 18.3 for details
- 2) See Section 18.4

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Sub-section 18.5.2 for details
- 2) True or False
  - a) False
  - b) True
  - c) True
  - d) False
  - e) False
  - f) False
  - g) False
  - h) True

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## 18.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## **UNIT 19 GENDER PERSPECTIVES: WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA\***

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### **Structure**

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Sources for Understanding Gender History
- 19.3 Gender Historiography
- 19.4 Position of Women in Early India
- 19.5 Significance of Gender Studies
- 19.6 Summary
- 19.7 Key Words
- 19.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 19.9 Suggested Readings

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### **19.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this Unit, you shall learn about:

- gender as a tool to understand and analyse history;
- history of writing gendered history with reference to early India;
- important sources for understanding gender history; and
- glimpses of women in early India.

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### **19.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Since most of the early scholars, researchers and historians were men, many aspects of society did not find a place in history books. For example, child-birth, menstruation, women's work, transgenders, households etc. did not find much mention. Rather than building a holistic picture of the past, some select aspects such as polity and the different roles of men became the central focus of history writing. Women were confined to one corner of the chapter where a paragraph or two was devoted to the 'status and position of women'. Even the details of these paragraphs were hardly different from each other. This made it look like as if history (and thereby society, polity, economy and all culture) belonged to men while women were only a small static unit to be mentioned separately. Of course, there were some exceptions, but these were however rare. This practice is being corrected now and the roles and presence of women are being read into all parts of historical questions.

In this Unit we shall learn more about the use and development of gender perspectives in the study of early Indian history. Gender History looks at women, men and other gender identities in a historical context and tries to discern the way cultural ideas and institutions affect and are affected by gendered roles.

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## 19.2 SOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING GENDER HISTORY

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Sources are the bases of history writing. From simple pre-historic tools to abstruse texts, everything can be utilized to understand life and roles of women in history. The presence as well as the absence of women from sources needs to be duly noticed, deliberated and argued upon and only then to be theorised upon. Certain objects being directly related to the lives of women or depicting the ideas of the *female principle* are of central importance. These include but are not limited to female figurines, art objects, texts attributed to or authored or compiled by women, monuments created by or for women, various objects relating to their lifestyle, objects associated with women on account of their cultural roles and so on.

It is important that the sources must be understood with reference to political structures, social conditions, economic activities and various other ideas and institutions of the time. Also, one needs to be sensitive to the spatial context and semantic changes that a text has gone through time. Texts have limitations. These need to be critically studied to understand gender history. It has been rightly pointed out by Uma Chakravarti that much of the gender history written in early phase was a 'partial view from above'. This referred to the utilization of select textual sources and focussed only on relational identity of women. There were, however, a few exceptions.

Inter-disciplinary researches incorporating sources and methods from anthropology, art history, ethnography, literary studies and other disciplines can uncover overall history and gendered roles.

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## 19.3 GENDER HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Amongst the many narratives propagated to denigrate Indian civilization and culture by the British colonial rulers, the condition of Indian women became a point of central reference. Various social evils that made the life of women miserable were pointed out and efforts were also made to introduce 'reforms.' *Sati*, child-marriages, imposed widowhood, polygamy, dowry, educational and economic inequality, *pardah* (*ghoonghat*) and many other practices prevailed during the colonial period that made the life of women difficult and pitiable. Some practices affected women of higher social and economic households while others led to misery for poorer women. Many social reform movements were started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to address these issues and contributions were made by Indian reformers as well as British officials and other Europeans. These efforts towards amelioration of the condition of women were an important and a welcome change.

The status of women came to find a pivotal place in the discourse on nation building and national character. The contested issue of the status of women became a symbolic battleground for different kinds of historians. They were either to be defended by the nationalists or to be rescued by the British or Indian reformers. *Women in India came to be treated as a homogeneous category and over generalisation became the norm.* While many communities in India practised widow remarriage and did not practise (much less forced) *sati* and while some practised divorces or separation, the image of the Indian woman who had been

subjugated as woman, wife and widow became a dominant theme in history writing.

Secondly, *a western vision was placed over the non-western societies and hence interpretations were far removed from the context.* For example, notion of *stridhan* was equated with dowry and little regard was paid to the provisions regarding its use and ownership by women. The huge social stigma that came along with the selling of jewellery of the household (one of the main components of *stridhan*) was paid no attention to. Similarly, penal provisions listed by ancient texts for misappropriation of women's property were not even looked into. Much before Independence exclusive volumes by western scholars began to write on *dharma* and society or to assess the position of women in *Hindu Law* even though many of them had not visited India even once. To illustrate the point, let us take the example of *Manusmriti*. This text comes from the *Dharmashastra* tradition and explicitly says that it should be interpreted with reference to *Mimamsa*. And yet, such an exercise was never undertaken. Selective verses from the text were used by scholars and researchers to paint a picture to their liking.

Thirdly, *the unilinear interpretations did not only create a monolithic (homogeneous) picture of 'Indian Women' but also stretched this image back to centuries and millenniums.* Even when the sources of history were few and the discipline was in its incipient stage, tall claims were made about understanding the history and culture of India. Only a few texts were translated, and they were made the basis for understanding all history. Works on women were based on selective texts. This uniform and singular narrative claiming to be the history of Indian women is problematic.

In a still larger context, research on the evolution of mankind shows that gender-neutral vocabulary was not used. For example, the use of the term 'mankind' in place of 'humankind', privileging hunting practices to gathering, indicates a mindset which puts man in the centre of existence. Studies, however, show that hunted prey formed only 35% of the diet while gathering fruits and other edible material supplied the major portion. Gathering of food resources was ordinarily done by women. Since gathering was an important activity, more than hunting for game, it could point to significant role playing by women. The male-bias was so strong that presumptive hypotheses were advanced without any valid arguments or evidence. For example, David Clarke associated the major and minor houses at settlements at Glastonbury with men and women respectively simply on the assumption that women were simply confined to household chores.

It has now been realised that not only Palaeolithic hunting but also the 'Neolithic Revolution' owes a lot to women. While the prehistoric period has very few gender studies, we have more material remains coming from the proto-historic phase. The gendered understanding of Harappan civilization is being built upon and various archaeological remains have been studied in this respect. The female figurines, idols of pregnant women, the statue of the 'dancing girl', various pieces of jewellery and personal belongings that have been discovered at various sites and offer useful insights on the public and private lives of women and men. The statue of a girl obtained from Mohanjodaro has been called a 'dancing girl' on grounds of familiarity with the institution of *devadasis* in the later times. Such backward looking explanations are problematic. Deeksha Bharadwaj has raised pertinent questions about the brushing aside of the detailed history that could have been worked out of a large and diverse mass of female figurines obtained

from the north-west of the Indian subcontinent. She has associated felinity with fertility and reproductivity while paying close attention to detailed contexts and forms in which they were found. She has painstakingly brought out the variety of processes and purposes that can be better understood if analyzed from a gendered perspective. These figurines till now had been simplistically associated with fertility and divinity.

There is a wide variety of terracotta female figurines that have been found at different sites right from the pre-Harappan times. Women figures are found suckling a baby, holding utensils, kneading dough, nursing infants, carrying objects like drums, seated figures for board games, with steatopygia (fat deposition on the hips and elsewhere), with floral head-dresses and in many other forms. Even figurines of pregnant women are quite common. However, most of these have been uncritically associated with fertility, religiosity and reproductive ideas, and have been passed off as representations of the Mother Goddesses. While some of them were votive objects, others are held to be toys or other utilities.

The focus on female *form* has been so stereotypical that women have been seen as associated only with home, hearth, fertility, sexuality and divinity. So much so that sometimes even male figurines in assumed womanly roles were classified as female figurines.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

- 1) What are the different types of sources for understanding gender in early India?

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- 2) What were the results of the studies conducted on women by British colonial historians?

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**19.4 POSITION OF WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA**

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The first literary tradition in the Indian subcontinent (and the oldest in the world) is that of the Vedic corpus. From the four *Samhitas* to the *Upanishads*, we find many interesting references to women in various roles. Some of these women have left their mark on the cultural heritage to this day and are remembered in various ritual and social contexts. Their names, stories, some highly revered hymns, and other interesting facets are mentioned in the Vedic corpus. Women

are referred to not only in the context of social roles but also as originators of many important hymns. Not only feminine and masculine but also various neuter characters and categories can be identified in the Vedic corpus.

The Vedic literature has been classified as Early Vedic and Later Vedic. The *Rigvedic* society and polity seems to be teeming with life and agro-pastoral economy was enmeshed in close kinship ties. Women as well as men participated in society, economy and polity. Some of the most revered hymns including the *gayatri mantra* are ascribed to women. Various natural phenomena are depicted as Goddesses and they are offered prayers. While quantitative analysis highlights the predominance of Indra, Agni, Varuna and other male gods, the power and stature of the goddesses is equally well established.

Not only in the context of the divine but also in the descriptions of the temporal world we have women making their own life choices and participating in the decision-making bodies. Women participated in all three Vedic socio-political assemblies viz. *Sabha*, *Samiti* and *Vidhata*. They had access to education and were even engaged in knowledge creation. They could choose to be *brahmavadinis* with or without matrimony. Hence, there is no reason to believe that they were only confined to home and hearth.

Historian Uma Chakravarti has investigated the history of early India for signs of forms of patriarchy in Indian past by bringing caste into her account of patriarchy in ancient India. The term she uses is “brahmanical patriarchy”. Looking at ancient texts such as the *Dharmasutras* (including the *Manusmriti*), as well as subsequent Buddhist sources, Chakravarti reconstructs early Indian society from approximately 1000 B.C. onwards. Social organization is reconstructed through these texts to show how control over women by men was mediated through the creation of caste and class hierarchies and differences. Women were subordinated to men. Their behaviour, reproduction and sexuality were controlled and guarded by men. Further, women were seen as a private property of men not having any existence of their own. There was a desire for sons and the birth of a son was celebrated. The Brahmanical texts depict that women had no access to economic resources. A woman was valued for her role in reproduction alone.

From the above passage it is clear that texts like *Manusmriti* portray a picture of women who enjoyed no rights and were insubordinated. T. S. Rukmani however attempts to understand if women had agency in early India. Her work has highlighted many interesting details. The author acknowledges the fact that though the patriarchal set up put women at a loss, there were instances where women found space to exercise their agency. She points out that though the texts like the *Kalpasutras* (*Srautasutras*, *Dharmasutras* and *Grhasutras*) revolved around the ideology of *Dharma* and there was not much space to express alternative ideas, still these works also find some leeway to express ideas reflecting changed conditions. For example, there is a statement in the *Apastamba Dharmasutra* that one should follow what women say in the funeral *samskaras*. Stephanie Jamison believes that in hospitality and exchange relations, women played an important role. She says that the approval of the wife was important in the successful completion of the soma sacrifice. In another study it has been shown that women enjoyed agency in deciding what was given in a sacrifice, *bhiksha* to a *brahmacarin* or to a *sanyasin*. The men had no authority in telling her what to do in these circumstances.

Vedic society was the one which valued marriage immensely. In such contexts, if a woman chose not to marry, then it would point to her exercising choice in her decision to go against the grain and remain unmarried. Mention may be made of Gargi. She was a composer of hymns and has been called a *brahmavadini* (Rukmani, 2009). This term applies to a woman who was a composer of hymns and chose to remain unmarried, devoting herself to the pursuit of learning. Similarly, in the case of Maitreyi, she consciously opts to be educated in the *Upanishadic* lore and Yajnavalkya does not dissuade her from exercising her choice. The statement in the *Rigveda* III, 55.16 that learned daughters should marry learned bridegrooms indicates that women had a say in marriage. Though male offspring is desired, there is a mantra in the *Rigveda*, recitation of which ensures the birth of a learned daughter.

Altekar refers to the *yajnas* like *seethayagna*, *rudrayajna* etc. that were to be performed exclusively by women. Some of the women were known for their exceptional calibre, for example, from the *Rigveda Samhita* we find mention of women like Apala, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Shachi, Vishwavara Atri, Sulabha and others. Women have not only been praised as independent individuals but also with reference to their contributions towards their natal or marital families.

The Later Vedic literature shows the progression towards a State society with a change in the organization of the society and polity. The chief comes to be referred to as *bhupati* instead of *gopati*. However, within the twelve important positions (*ratnis*) mentioned, the chief queen retains a special position under the title *mahisi*. The importance of the chief queen continued as gleaned from several references to them in the Epics, *Arthashastra* and even in coins and epigraphs from early historical times. The other *Samhitas* also refer to women sages such as *Rishikas*. The wife is referred to as *sahadharmini*. *Brahmanas* or the texts dealing with the performance of the *yajna* (Vedic ritual), requires a man to be accompanied by his wife to be able to carry out rituals. For example, *Aitareya Brahmana* looks upon the wife as essential to spiritual wholesomeness of the husband. However, there is a mention of some problematic institutions as well. Uma Chakravarti has pointed towards the condition of Vedic *Dasis* (female servant/slave) who are referred to in numerous instances. They were the objects of *dana* (donation/gift) and *dakshina* (fee). Whether the instance of putting Draupadi on wager in the game of dice points towards treating women as an item of property is however a matter of further research.

It is generally believed that from the post Vedic period the condition of the women steadily deteriorated. However, Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* and subsequent grammatical literature speak highly of women *acharyas* and *Upadhyayas*. Thus, the memory and practice of a *brahmavadini* continued even after the Vedic period. The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and even the *Puranas* keep the memory of *brhamavadini* alive. Mention may be made of Anasuya, Kunti, Damyanti, Draupadi, Gandhari, Rukmini who continued to fire the imagination of the poets. Texts show that the daughter of Kuni-garga refused marriage because she did not find anyone worthy of her (*Salyaparvan* 52. 3-25).

The Epics also mention women whose opinions were sought in major events. For example, after the thirteen years of exile, while debating upon the future course of action regarding the restoration of their share, the Pandavas along with Krishna asks Draupadi for her views. Similarly, when Krishna goes to the

Kaurava's court to plead the case of Pandavas, Gandhari is called upon to persuade her sons to listen to reason.

Since a woman taking *sanyasa* was an act of transgression, one can explore women's agency through such instances. In the *Ramayana*, Sabari, who was the disciple of Sage Matanga, and whose hermitage was on the banks of river Pampa was one such *sanyasin*. Such women find mention in *Smriti* literature and *Arthashastra*. Kautilya's prohibition against initiating women into *Sanyasa* can make sense only if women were being initiated into *sanyasa*. He advises the king to employ female *parivrajakas* as spies. Megasthenes mentions women who accompanied their husbands to the forest, probably referring to the *Vanaprastha* stage.

Another category of literature called *Shastras* that comprises of *sutras* (aphorisms) and the *smriti* texts ('that which is remembered') becomes important in the post-Vedic period. These textual traditions cover many subjects relating to the four kinds of pursuits of life referred to as *purusharthas* (namely *dharma*, *karma*, *kama* and *moksha*). In all these texts we find very liberal values and freedom for both women and men.

The setting up of a household is seen as an ideal for men as well as women (though asceticism for learning is equally praised for both). For example, *Apastambha Sutra* opines that rituals carried out by an unmarried man do not please the *devatas* (divinities). Similarly, *Manusmriti* provides that 'for three years shall a girl wait after the onset of her puberty; after that time, she may find for herself a husband of equal status. If a woman who has not been given in marriage finds a husband on her own, she does not incur any sin, and neither does the man she finds' [MS IX.90-91]. Thus, we see that women enjoyed choice in matters of matrimony. It is interesting to note that unmarried daughters were to be provided for by the father. In fact, daughter is stated to be the object of utmost affection [MS IV.185]. Should a girl lose her parents, her economic interests were well looked after. It was provided that from their shares, 'the brothers shall give individually to the unmarried girls, one-quarter from the share of each. Those unwilling to give will become outcastes' [MS IX.118].

With regards to defining contemporary attitude towards women, *Apastambha Sutra* prescribed that 'All must make a way for a woman when she is treading a path.' Later *Dharmashastra* also makes similar statements. *Yagnavalkyasmriti* mentions that 'women are the embodiment of all divine virtues on earth.' However, there are several provisions that look problematic. On one hand, we have reverence assigned to the feminine (divine and worldly) and important roles being played by them, on the other hand we have questionable provisions and descriptions like right to chastise them through beating or discarding.

The post-Vedic phase from 6th century BCE onwards is also rich in literary traditions with ample depictions of women. Classical Sanskrit, Pali, Ardha-Magadhi, and other Prakrit languages have a rich textual tradition from this phase onwards. The diversity of languages is also accompanied by a diversity of rich intellectual traditions. Not only do the oral traditions continue but various archaeological remains have been recovered too. Interestingly, we have an entire body of literature that is ascribed totally to women who became Buddhist nuns. These are referred to as *Therigathas* i.e. the Songs of the Elder *Bhikkhunis* (Buddhist Women who joined the *Samgha*).

The *Arthashastra* gives us information on women who were engaged in economic activities of various kinds. They formed a part of both the skilled and the unskilled workforce. They were into professional as well as non-professional employment. Some of their vocations were related to their gender, while the others were not. There were female state employees as well as independent working women. Similarly, some of them were engaged in activities which though not dependent on their biological constitution are nonetheless categorized as women's domain, e.g. domestic services etc. Some of them were actual state employees, while some others were in contractual relations with the State. For example, we have female bodyguards and spies in the State employment. Jaiswal suggests that these women perhaps came from *Bhila* or *Kirata* tribe. Female spies were not only to gather information and relay it to proper source, but also to carry out assassinations. However, a closer look at the text shows that there were different classes of female spies engaged for different purposes. Amongst others 'women skilled in arts were to be employed as spies living inside their houses' [KA I.12.21]. Others were required to work as assassins [KA V.1.19, XII.5.48]. Some were to play the roles of young and beautiful widows to tempt the lust of greedy enemy [KA XIII.2.42]. Female slaves formed an important part of the workforce both in the royal establishment and in the common households. In the royal establishment, 'female slaves of proven integrity' were to do the work of bath-attendants, shampooers, bed-preparers, laundresses and garland-makers; otherwise they were required to supervise the artists doing these jobs [KA I.21.13]. Further they were to offer garments, flowers and other cosmetics after first putting them on their own eyes, bosoms and arms [KA XXI.14-15]. Thus, they were functioning not only as personal attendants but also as security check.

We also have various Buddhist and Jaina traditions giving us some glimpses of the ideas and institutions of the times. Apart from the orthodox (Vedic and Brahmanic) and heterodox normative tradition we have many popular texts like the Epics in Sanskrit and *Jatakas* in Pali. Even Prakrit language has many interesting narratives and poetic texts. The *Therigatha* by the Buddhist nuns are an interesting literary source that provides us with a glimpse of various women who attained *arhantship* or similar other stages of Realisation. The deliberation on the age and deterioration of the body by Ambapali, the non-importance of sensual or bodily pleasures by Nanda, Vimla and Shubha etc points towards the intellectual and spiritual engagements and attainments of women. It is interesting to note that an absolutely contrary picture is presented by the *Jatakas* wherein more often than not, women are depicted as evil.

It is important to note that women were given an evil aura mostly in their roles as wives or beloveds. Though we also have examples of their acting equally vicious in the role of mother, but such references are rare. In the same story we have different natures ascribed to women. Thus, it is clear that the *Jatakas* are particularly biased against the passionate or affectionate relationships between man and woman. For example, *Suvannahamsa Jataka* gives us an account of a gold-feathered bird that comes to visit his wife of previous birth so as to help their destitute situation. In this story, the wife out of greed is seen to act mean and cuts the bird to pieces, while the daughters refuse to do so. While herein the fault is with greed, we have a number of stories wherein adultery is one evil specifically associated with women. For example, in many stories we have a brahmana wife committing adultery and her sin being reported by pets or being discovered by the husband himself. It therefore becomes important to

contextualize these stories in the newly organized social order and demands it made on the men and women. It is this contextualisation and use of gendered understanding that shall help us in understanding the historical processes beyond textual descriptions.

Both the texts and the archaeological remains have been studied by various scholars and opposing interpretations are not rare. For example, on one side Sita (from *Ramayana*) and Draupadi (from *Mahabharata*) have been seen as victims of the patriarchal order; on the other hand, they are also represented as self-willed women. Draupadi after the game of dice presents herself as a forceful and articulate woman. It's her wit that saves her husbands from becoming slaves of the Kauravas. Her incensed outrage at the attack on her modesty, her bitter lamentations to Krishna, her furious tirade against Yudhishtira for his seeming inability to defend her honour and many more such instances show her to be an aggressive woman. This persona is juxtaposed to her representations as an ideal wife elsewhere. However, Draupadi is never idealised as a perfect wife who endures the most severe trials without complaint. This honour is reserved for Sita in the *Ramayana*. She is also presented as a victim like Draupadi and voices her concern at her fate openly. However, her aggression is directed inwards as indicated by her action against the self which culminate in her union with the mother Earth. Thus, the social norms not only in ancient India but even today glorify Sita as the ideal woman because she expressed her anger and aggression through socially accepted norms by internalising grief and masochistically turning against the self by performing a ritual suicide. Blatant aggression from a woman was not culturally accepted in a patriarchal society and thus we find that patriarchal norms dictated what was accepted and what was not in terms of woman's behaviour.

Are the limited number of hymns ascribed to the Vedic women a signifier of their general status? Are the goddesses merely representational with no connection to the ideas and behaviour towards women? Did only princesses choose their spouses? Are the warrior women an exception? Such searching questions need to be addressed with due diligence.

While women studies are a good development there is a need to expand the horizons to include other varieties of human existence. We have narratives of fluid sexuality in various texts. The one year of Arjuna's life spent as Brihallana and rebirth of Amba as Shikhandi are some interesting instances. The artefacts found at the site of Sheri Khan Tarakai include visibly hermaphroditic figurines. There is a need to understand the notions of the feminine, masculine, neuter, and other forms of gender and sexual identities. These will have ramifications for understanding the ideas of conjugality, family, community, society and even polity and spirituality.

The sources mentioned in this Unit are relevant for a period till around 200 BCE. This is neither an exhaustive list nor relevant to all regions. Some of these texts have multiple layers and are relevant even for a few centuries later. Thus, we see that all sources can be utilized for understanding gender history. We also learnt that understanding women's history has implications for understanding overall history.



**19.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER STUDIES**

Sweeping statements or generalisation about the position of women in early India have become problematic. It is important to read texts in a nuanced manner in order to understand the position of women. There are divergent, multiple voices and one single paradigm of interpretation cannot fit all. Additionally, it is important to be careful about the western bias in treating women as subservient and wholly lacking any voice. The best strategy is to undertake a piece by piece analysis. We should realize that such meta categories like Hinduism, *Tantra*, Women were not homogeneous.

We need to articulate those voices which went against the grain and provide an alternative glimpse into what was practised as against what was the norm. The dominant paradigm may be the one as echoed by *Manusmriti* that women had no independence in all stages of life, but we do find instances in other texts and even in *Manusmriti* itself which go counter to this sentiment. One has also to investigate that the authors of these different texts may have been working with an overriding ideology. However, there are texts like the *Smriti* literature which not only weave in different viewpoints as well as allow the author to articulate his own morality. As society changed, new ideas and values were incorporated and many questions, one finds, remain unresolved. One needs to explore the tension which existed between what was normative and what was being actually practised. Brahmanical texts consciously reinforce the ideology of *Dharma*, and we need to be aware of these motives and not take everything in a literal sense (Rukmani, 2009).

Gender studies have a very important role to play in history. Looking at history with detailed focus on understanding the role of women in the evolution of human societies has not only contributed to reclaiming a more visible place for women in history but has also helped us to understand many other processes in a new light. Furthermore, the effort and concern to find previously ignored voices in history has led to many searching questions and methodological developments. The bias inherent in earlier works has also been identified and the ideal of objective history writing is now being pursued afresh.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1) Write a few lines about the position of women in early India.  
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- 2) What is the significance of gender studies?  
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## 19.6 SUMMARY

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Human civilisations were built by men as well as women, however, history writing has a huge male-bias. Women were confined to questions of status and position that were largely evaluated in terms of their roles in the domestic sphere. Their treatment as wives and widows became a central focus of most research alongside their place in ritual or religious context. This made them peripheral to mainstream history. This was questioned by various scholars from time to time and led to the development of gendered understanding of history. Focusing attention on women's history helps to rectify the method which sees women as a monolithic homogeneous category. Writing gender history has helped in building an image of the past that is wholesome and nuanced.

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## 19.7 KEY WORDS

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- Gender** : The cultural outlook defining roles for humans based on biological sexual apparatus. It is distinct from sex and sexuality. Sex relates to biological reproductive apparatus. Sexuality refers to the partner preference of a person.
- Gender History** : Historical studies enquiring into different social and cultural aspects that shaped life of women and men in different periods. It is now expanding into understanding of other sexualities and gendered roles.
- Intersectionality** : The interconnectedness of social identity markers (categorizations) like gender, class, religions etc. that affects the life of groups or individuals and create interdependent systems of support or exploitation depending on where the person is placed in social, economic, political or ritual hierarchy.
- Interpolation** : An interpolation, in relation to literature and especially ancient manuscripts, is an entry or passage in a text that was not written or compiled by the original author/ compilers.
- Semantic history** : The meanings of terms changes over time. The history of meanings and implications of a word and its usage is called semantic history.

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## 19.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) You answer should include the various literary sources and archaeological sources which can be used to understand gender in Early India. For details see sections 19.2.
- 2) Please see Section 19.3

- 1) See Section 19.4
- 2) See Section 19.5

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## **19.9 SUGGESTED READINGS**

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