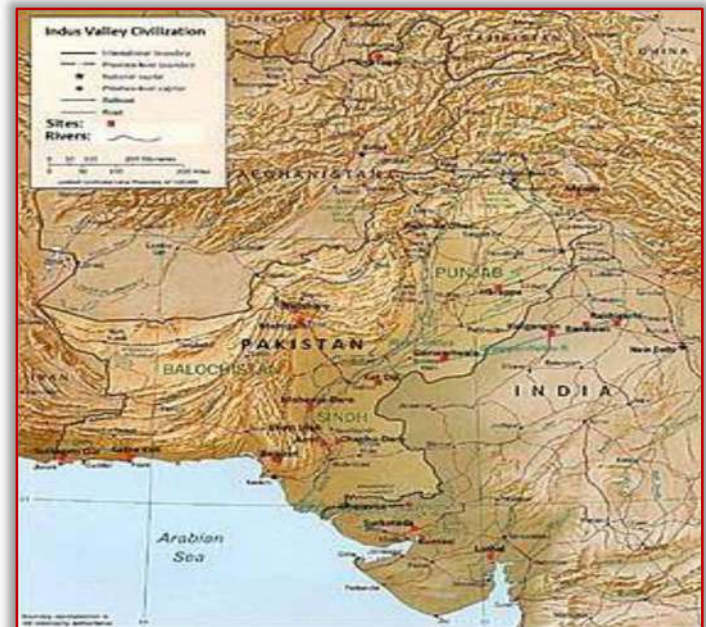
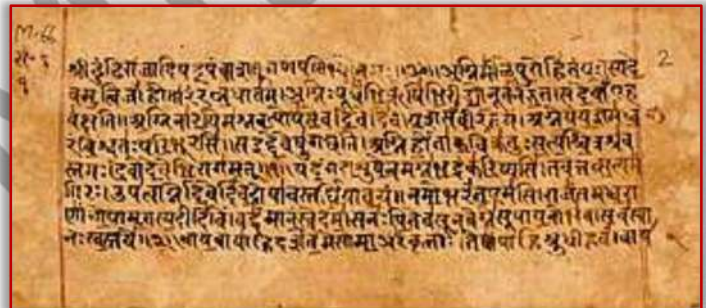


INTRODUCTION

This chapter delves into the journey of deciphering ancient inscriptions, uncovering valuable insights into India's political and economic evolution from the Mauryan to the Gupta period. Inscriptions, often carved on stone or metal, serve as vital records that narrate tales of kingship, governance, land grants, and socio-economic transactions that shaped the subcontinent's history. This chapter highlights the role of inscriptions in reshaping our understanding of historical narratives, particularly through the discovery and decipherment of ancient scripts. Special emphasis is placed on the Asokan inscriptions, which reflect the political ideology and administrative reach of the Mauryan Empire, and Gupta-period land grants, which shed light on the socio-economic policies and changes in landholding patterns during that time. These inscriptions not only provide direct insights into royal decrees but also give glimpses of the larger political and economic frameworks that governed society during these pivotal periods in Indian history. Through these historical records, we explore how the past is reconstructed and how shifts in power and economy are documented and interpreted by modern scholars.

TOPICS COVERED

1. Broad Overview: Political and Economic History from The Mauryan to The Gupta Period.
2. Story Of Discovery: Inscriptions And the Decipherment of The Script. Shifts in The Understanding of Political and Economic History.
3. Excerpt: Asokan Inscription and Gupta Period Land Grant.



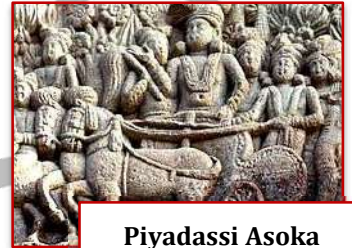
There were several developments in different parts of the subcontinent during the long span of 1,500 years following the end of the Harappan civilisation. The Rigveda was composed by people living along the Indus and its tributaries. Agricultural settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent, including north India, the Deccan Plateau, and parts of Karnataka. Besides, there is evidence of pastoral populations in the Deccan and further south.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY : STORIES TELL BY INSCRIPTIONS

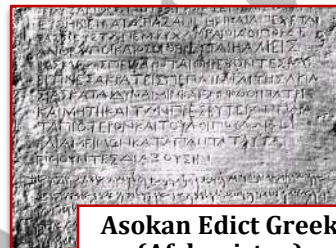
In the 1830s an officer of the East India Company, James Prinsep, deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi, two scripts used in the earliest inscriptions and coins. He found a king referred to as Piyadassi - meaning “pleasant to behold’ in many inscriptions which also referred to the king as Asoka. Most scripts used to write modern Indian languages are derived from Brahmi, the script used in most Asokan inscriptions. Earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit. In the northwest of the subcontinent, Asokan inscriptions were in Aramaic and Greek. The Aramaic and Greek scripts were used for inscriptions in Afghanistan. It was only after decades of painstaking investigations by several epigraphists that James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838. Coins of Indo-Greek kings contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. Prinsep identified the language of the Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit.



James Prinsep



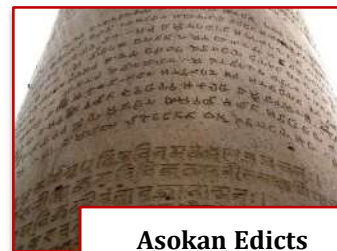
Piyadassi Asoka



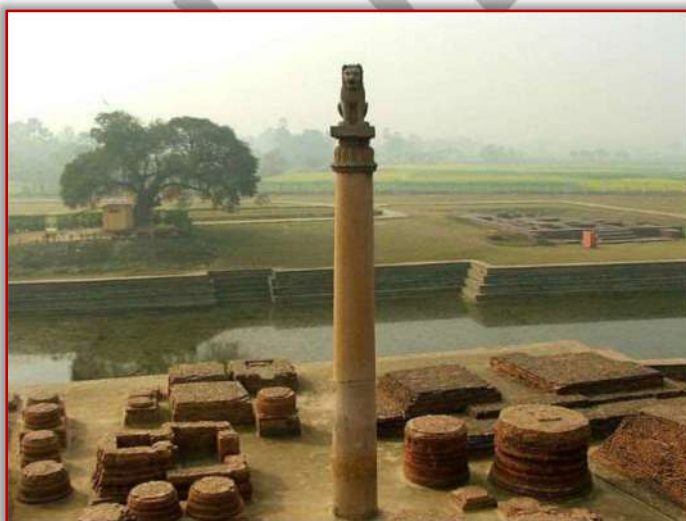
Asokan Edict Greek (Afghanistan)



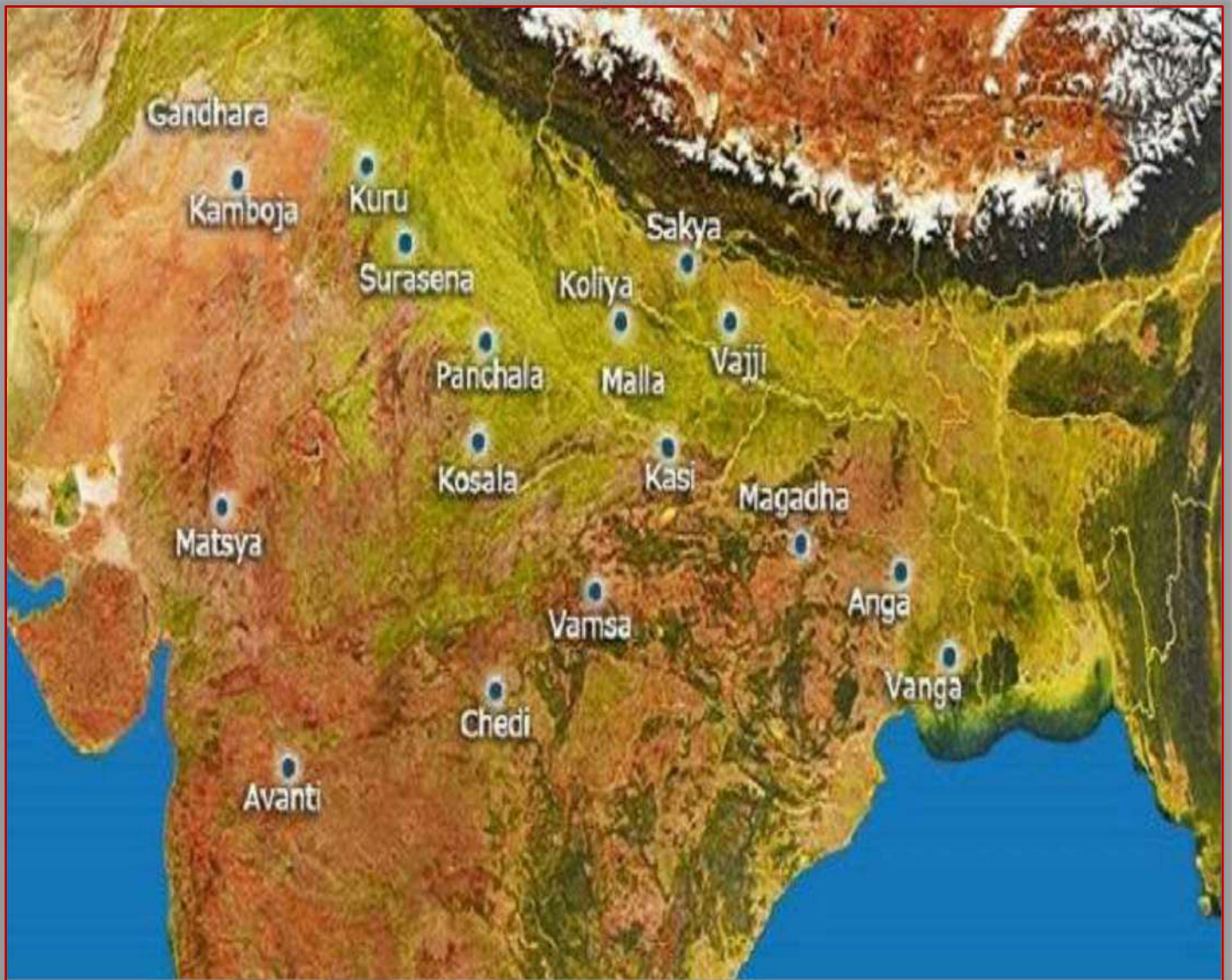
Indo Greek King Coins



Asokan Edicts



The earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit. Terms in languages such as Pali, Tamil and Sanskrit, which too were used to write inscriptions and texts. From the first millennium BCE, new modes of disposal of the dead, including the making of elaborate stone structures known as megaliths, emerged in central and south India. To learn about the history of this period, Vedas, along with some other literary works, are the important sources. Rigveda, Samaveda, Atharvaveda, and Yajurveda are the four Vedas.



The sixth century BCE is an era associated with early states, cities, the growing use of iron, the development of coinage, etc. Early Buddhist and Jaina texts mention, amongst other things, sixteen states known as mahajanapadas. Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara and Avantiy, these were amongst the most important mahajanapadas. While most mahajanapadas were ruled by kings, some, known as ganas or sanghas, were oligarchies, where power was shared by a number of men,

often collectively called **rajas**. Both **Mahavira** and the **Buddha** belonged to such **ganas**. In some instances, as in the case of the **Vajji sangha**, the **rajas** probably controlled resources such as land collectively.

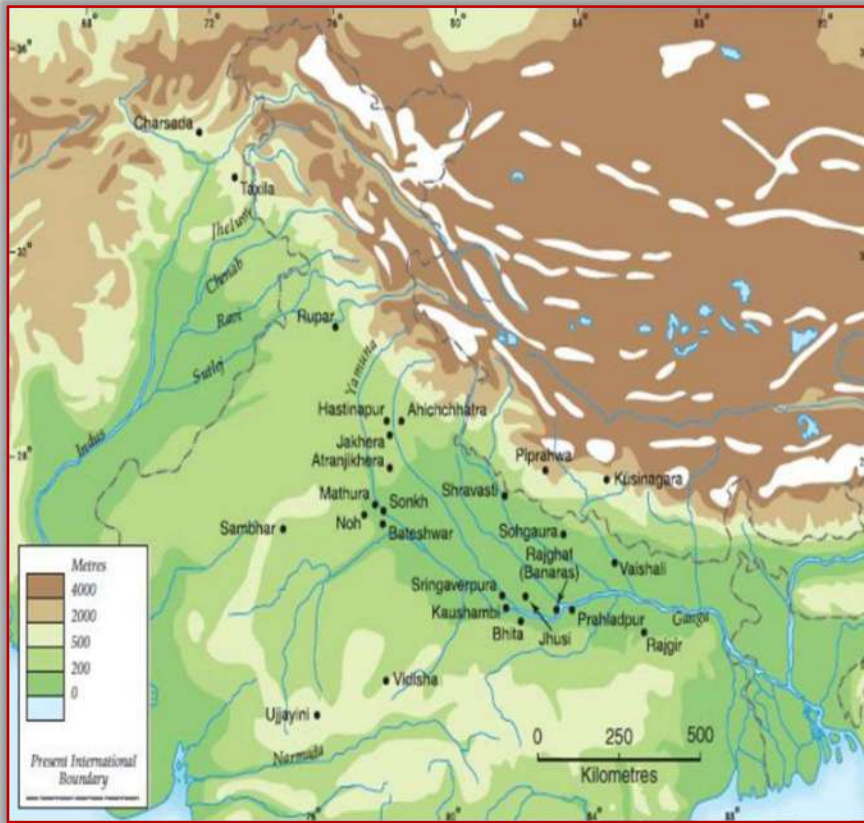
Each **mahajanapada** had a **capital city**, which was often fortified. From c. sixth century BCE onwards, **Brahmanas** began composing **Sanskrit texts** known as the **Dharmasutras**. These laid down norms for rulers (as well as for other social categories), who were ideally expected to be **Kshatriyas**. Rulers were advised to collect taxes and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans.



Royal Procession Leaving Rajgriha
In the fifth century BCE, the **Magadha** rulers decided to shift their capital from **Rajagriha** to **Pataliputra**.

Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, **Magadha** (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful **mahajanapada**. However, early Buddhist and Jain writers who wrote about **Magadha** attributed its power to the policies of ruthlessly ambitious kings like **Bimbisara**, **Ajatasattu** and **Mahapadma Nanda** of **Magadha** **mahajanapada**. **Magadha** was a region where agriculture was especially productive. Besides, iron mines (in present-day Jharkhand) were accessible and provided resources for tools and weapons. Elephants, an important component of the army, were found in forests in the region.

Initially, **Rajagaha** was the capital of **Magadha**. **Chandragupta Maurya** founded the **Mauryan empire** by defeating the **Nanda dynasty** (last dynasty of the **mahajanapada**) in 321 BCE. He extended control as far northwest as **Afghanistan** and **Baluchistan**, and his grandson **Asoka**, arguably the most famous ruler of early India, conquered **Kalinga** (present-day coastal **Orissa**). The account of **Megasthenes** (a Greek ambassador to the court of **Chandragupta Maurya**), called **Indica** and the **Arthashastra**, composed by **Kautilya** or **Chanakya** (the minister of **Chandragupta**) are the valuable sources of the **Mauryan empire**. The inscriptions of **Asoka** (c. 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.



In 297 BCE, Bindusara, the son of Chandragupta Maurya became the king after the death of Chandragupta. In 268 BCE, his son Ashoka/Asoka became the ruler of the empire. Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his subjects and officials on stone surfaces - natural rocks as well as polished pillars.

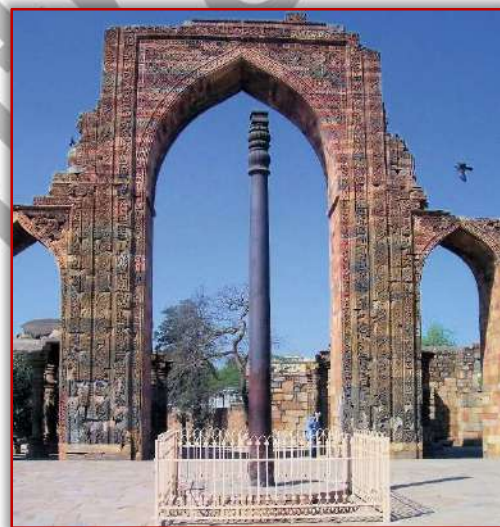
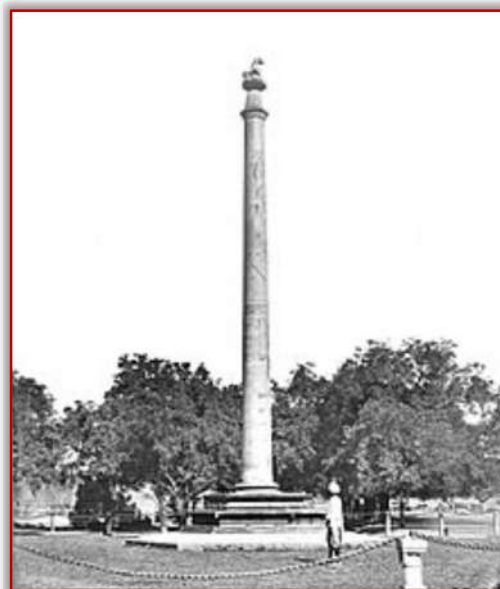
Five major political centres in the empire - the capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri were mentioned in Asokan inscriptions. The same message engraved everywhere - from the present-day North West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan, to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and

Uttarakhand in India. According to Greek sources, the Mauryan ruler had a standing army of 600,000 foot-soldiers, 30,000 cavalry and 9,000 elephants. Some historians consider these accounts to be exaggerated.

The administrative control was strongest in areas around the capital and the provincial centres. These centres were carefully chosen, both Taxila and Ujjayini being situated on important long-distance trade routes, while Suvarnagiri (literally, the golden mountain) was possibly important for tapping the gold mines of Karnataka.

Communication along both land and riverine routes was vital for the existence of the empire. Journeys from the centre to the provinces could have taken weeks if not months. This meant arranging for provisions as well as protection for those who were on the move. It is obvious that the army was an important means for ensuring the latter. Of these, one looked after the navy, the second managed





transport and provisions, the third was responsible for foot-soldiers, the fourth for horses, the fifth for chariots and the sixth for elephants. The activities of the second subcommittee were rather varied: arranging for bullock carts to carry equipment, procuring food for soldiers and fodder for animals, and recruiting servants and artisans to look after the soldiers. **Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating dhamma.** Special officers, known as the **dhamma mahamatta**, were appointed to spread the message of dhamma.

By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states such as the Gupta Empire. Histories of the Gupta rulers have been reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including prashastis. The Prayaga Prashasti (also known as the Allahabad Pillar Inscription - pic right) composed in Sanskrit by



Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta, arguably the most powerful of the Gupta rulers. Sri Gupta founded the Gupta Empire c. 240-280 AD. Chandragupta I was the son of Ghatotkacha, the first independent king of the Gupta dynasty in 320 CE. Chandragupta I was succeeded by his son Samudragupta, one of the greatest rulers of the empire, in 335 AD.

The peak of the territorial expansion of the Gupta empire reached its heights during the reign of Chandragupta-II, the son of Samudragupta. He defeated Saka Kshatras of western India in a war. This

was his biggest military achievement. The **Chandra of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription** has been identified with Chandragupta-II.

Ordinary people rarely left accounts of their thoughts and experiences. Nevertheless, historians have tried to solve this problem by examining stories contained in anthologies such as the Jatakas and the Panchatantra. The Jatakas were written in Pali around the middle of the first millennium CE. One story known as the **Gandatindu Jataka** describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king; these included elderly women and men, cultivators, herders, village boys and even animals.

A **chief** is a powerful man whose position may or may not be hereditary. He derives support from his kinfolk. His functions may include performing special rituals, leadership in warfare, and arbitrating disputes. He receives gifts from his subordinates (unlike kings who usually collect taxes) and often distributes these amongst his supporters. Generally, there are no regular armies and officials in chiefdoms.

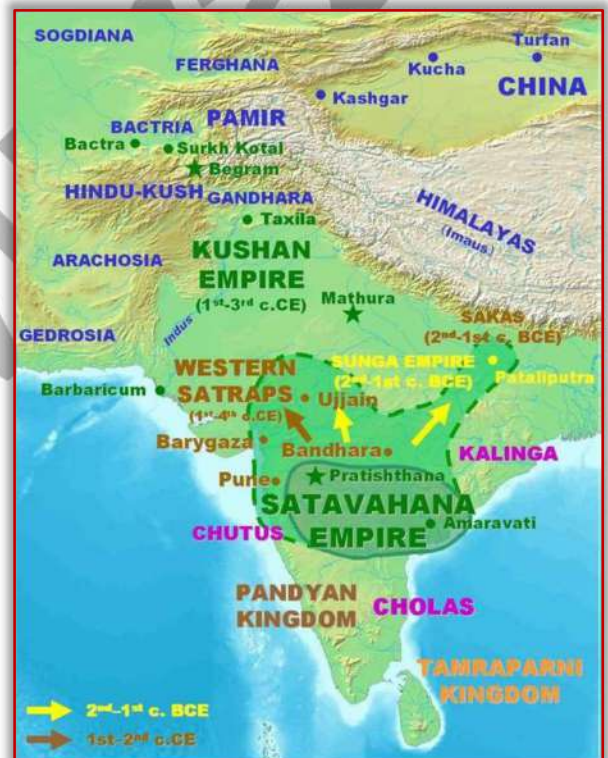
CHIEFS AND KINGS IN THE SOUTH

The chiefdoms of the **Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas** emerged in **Tamilakam** (the name of the ancient Tamil country), which included parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, in addition to Tamil Nadu), proved to be stable and prosperous. The early Tamil Sangam texts contain poems describing chiefs.

Satavahanas ruled over parts of western and central India (c. second century BCE-second century CE) and the **Shakas** established kingdoms in the north-western and western parts of the subcontinent. They derived revenues from long-distance trade.

The **Kushanas** (c. first century BCE/first century CE) ruled over a **vast kingdom extending from Central Asia to northwest India**. Their history has been reconstructed from inscriptions and textual traditions.

Colossal statues of Kushana rulers have been found installed in a shrine at **Mat** near **Mathura (Uttar Pradesh)**. Similar statues have been found in a shrine in Afghanistan as well. Many Kushana rulers also adopted the title **devaputra**, or “**son of god**”, possibly inspired by Chinese rulers who called themselves sons of heaven. By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. **Many of these depended on samantas, who offered homage and provided military support to rulers. Powerful samantas** could become kings: conversely, weak rulers might find themselves being reduced to positions of subordination.



Silappadikaram is an epic written in Tamil.



RURAL SOCIETY

The **strategy for increasing production** was the shift to plough agriculture, which **spread in fertile alluvial river valleys** such as those of the **Ganga** and the **Kaveri** from c. sixth century BCE. The iron-tipped plough share was used to turn the alluvial soil in areas which had high rainfall. Moreover, in some parts of the Ganga valley, production of paddy was dramatically increased by the introduction of transplantation.

Cultivators in areas which were semi-arid, such as parts of **Punjab and Rajasthan** did not adopt it till the twentieth century, and those living in hilly tracts in the northeastern and central parts of the subcontinent practised hoe agriculture, which was much better suited to the terrain.

Another strategy adopted to increase agricultural production was the **use of irrigation, through wells and tanks, and less commonly, canals**. Communities as well as individuals organised the construction of irrigation works. The latter, usually powerful men including kings, often recorded such activities in inscriptions. It is evident that there was a **growing differentiation** amongst people engaged in **agriculture - stories, especially within the Buddhist tradition, refer to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants, as well as large landholders**.

The term **Gahapati** was often used in Pali texts to **designate the second and third categories**. The large landholders, as well as the village headman, emerged as powerful figures, and often exercised control over other cultivators. **Early Tamil literature (the Sangam texts)** also mentions different categories of people living in the villages - **large landowners or vellalar, ploughmen or uzhar and slaves or adimai**.

A **Gahapati** was the owner, master or head of a household, who exercised control over the women, children, slaves and workers who shared a common residence. He was also the owner of the resources - land, animals and other things - that belonged to the household. Sometimes the term was used as a marker of status for men belonging to the urban elite, including wealthy merchants.



The **Manusmṛiti** is one of the best-known legal texts of early India, written in Sanskrit and compiled between c. second century BCE and c. second century CE.

Prabhavati Gupta was the daughter of one of the most important rulers in early Indian history, Chandragupta II (c. 375-415 CE). She was married into another important ruling family, that of the Vakatakas, who were powerful in the Deccan.

LAND GRANTS AND NEW RURAL ELITES

We find grants of land being made, many of which were recorded in inscriptions. The records that have survived are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas. From the seventh century onwards, part of the inscription was in Sanskrit, while the rest was in a local language such as Tamil or Telugu. The records that have survived are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas.

According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have independent access to resources such as land. However, the inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land, which she then granted.

An **Agrahara** was land granted to a Brahmana, who was usually exempted from paying land revenue and other dues to the king, and was often given the right to collect these dues from the local people.

The inscription also gives us an idea about **rural populations** - these included Brahmanas and peasants, as well as others who were expected to provide a range of produce to the king or his representatives. And according to the inscription, they would have to obey the new lord of the village, and perhaps pay him all these dues.

TOWNS AND TRADE



The **Harshacharita** is a biography of Harshavardhana, the ruler of Kanauj, composed in Sanskrit by his court poet, Banabhatta (c. seventh century CE).

All major towns were located along routes of communication. Some such as **Pataliputra** were on **riverine routes**. Others, such as Ujjayini, were along **land routes**, and yet others, such as Puhar, were near the coast, from where sea routes began. Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activity. In the cities fine pottery bowls and dishes, with a glossy finish, known as Northern Black Polished Ware, probably used by rich people, and ornaments, tools, weapons, vessels, figurines, made of a wide range of materials - gold, silver, copper, bronze, ivory, glass, shell and terracotta.

By the **second century BCE**, short votive inscriptions (**Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions**) were found in a number of cities that mention the name of the donor, and sometimes specify his/ her occupation as well. They tell us about people who lived in towns: washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants and kings. Guilds or shrenis, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well.



TRADE IN THE SUBCONTINENT AND BEYOND

From the sixth century BCE, land and river routes criss-crossed the subcontinent and extended in various directions - overland into Central Asia and beyond, and overseas, from ports that dotted the coastline - extending across the Arabian Sea to East and North Africa and West Asia, and through the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia and China. Rulers often attempted to control these routes, possibly by offering protection for a price.

There were seafarers, whose ventures were risky but highly profitable. Successful merchants, designated as **masattuvan in Tamil and setthis and sathavahas in Prakrit**. A wide range of goods were carried from one place to another - salt, grain, cloth, metal ores and finished products, stone, timber, medicinal plants, to name a few. Spices, especially pepper, were in high demand in the Roman Empire, as were textiles and medicinal plants, and these were all transported across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean.



The Chinese pilgrim **Xuan Zang** visited the city in the seventh century CE, he found it in ruins, and with a very small population.

COINS AND KINGS

Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (c. sixth century BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used. Attempts made to identify the symbols on punch marked coins with specific ruling dynasties, including the Mauryas, suggest that these were issued by kings. It is also likely that merchants, bankers and townspeople issued some of these coins.

Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (c. first century CE)



The History of Pataliputra

Each city had a history of its own. Pataliputra, for instance, began as a village known as Pataligrama. Then, in the fifth century BCE, the Magadhan rulers decided to shift their capital from Rajagaha to this settlement and renamed it. By the fourth century BCE, it was the capital of the Mauryan Empire and one of the largest cities in Asia. Subsequently, its importance apparently declined. When the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang visited the city in the seventh century CE, he found it in ruins, and with a very small population.

The first coins to bear the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks, who established control over the north-western part of the subcontinent c. second century BCE.

The Kushanas, however, issued the largest hoards of gold coins, first gold coins c. first century CE. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued by contemporary Roman emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran, and have been found from several sites in north India and Central Asia. Hoards of Roman coins have been found at archaeological sites in South India, making it clear that trade networks were not limited to political boundaries. South India was not part of the Roman Empire, but there were close connections through trade.

Coins were also issued by tribal republics such as that of the Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (c. first century CE). Archaeologists have unearthed several thousand copper coins issued by the Yaudheyas, pointing to the latter's interest and participation in economic exchanges. Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. These coins facilitated long-distance transactions from which kings also benefited.



From c. Sixth century CE onwards, finds of gold coins taper off. Some historians believe that the fall of the Western Roman Empire coincided with the decline of long-distance trade, affecting the prosperity of the states, communities, and regions that had benefited from it. Others argue that new cities and networks of trade began to emerge around this time. They also point out that although coins from the period are few in number, inscriptions and texts continue to mention coins.

SOME IMPORTANT EVENTS TO REMEMBER

c. 600-500 BCE	Paddy transplantation; urbanisation in the Ganga valley; mahajanapadas; punch-marked coins
c. 500-400 BCE	Rulers of Magadha consolidate power
c. 327-325 BCE	Invasion of Alexander of Macedon
c. 321 BCE	Accession of Chandragupta Maurya
c. 272/268-231 BCE	Reign of Asoka
c. 185 BCE	End of the Mauryan empire
c. 200-100 BCE	Indo-Greek rule in the northwest; Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in south India; Satavahanas in the Deccan
c. 100 BCE-200 CE	Shaka (peoples from Central Asia) rulers in the northwest; Roman trade; gold coinage
c. 78 CE	Accession of Kanishka
c. 100-200 CE	Earliest inscriptional evidence of land grants by Satavahana and Shaka rulers
c. 320 CE	Beginning of Gupta rule

c. 600-500 BCE	Paddy transplanted; urbanisation in the Ganga valley; mahajanapadas; punch-marked coins
c. 335-375 CE	Samudragupta
c. 375-415 CE	Chandragupta II; Vakatakas in the Deccan
c. 500-600 CE	Rise of the Chalukyas in Karnataka and of the Pallavas in Tamil Nadu
c. 606-647 CE	Harshavardhana king of Kanauj; Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang comes in search of Buddhist texts
c. 712	Arabs conquer Sind

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