

Part-I: CHAPTER 2
KINGS, FARMERS AND TOWNS: Early States and Economics
(C 600 BCE - 600 CE)
Revision Notes

Key concept in nutshell

Several developments in different parts of the subcontinent (India) the long span of 1500 following the end of Harappan Civilization:-

- Rigveda was composed along the Indus and its tributaries.
- Agricultural Settlements emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.
- New mode of disposal of the dead like making megaliths.
- By C 600 BCE growth of new cities and kingdoms.
- 600 BCE major turning point in early Indian history.
- Growth of sixteen Mahajanapadas. Many were ruled by kings.
- Some known as ganas or sanghas were oligarchies
- Between the 600 BCE and 400 BCE Magadha became the most powerful Mahajanapada.
- Emergence of Mauryan Empire Chandragupta Maurya (C 321 BCE) founder of the empire extended control upto Afghanistan and Baluchistan.
- His grandson Ashoka, the most famous ruler conquered Kalinga.
- Variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire archaeological finds especially sculpture, Ashoka's Inscriptions, Literary sources like Indica account.

New Notions of Kingship

- By C 200 BCE emergence of new chiefdoms and kingdoms in several parts of the subcontinent.
- Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam, known from Sangam text.
- Most of these states including Satavahanas and Shakas had control over long distance trade networks.
- Kushanas (C First century BCE to first century CE) ruled over a vast kingdom



extending from central Asia to North West India.

- Their history has been reconstructed from Inscriptions, Coins and sculptures which convey a sense of the notions of kingship.
- History of the Guptas (4th century CE) has been reconstructed from literatures, coins and inscriptions including Prashastis.
- What did subjects think about their rulers? Historians have tried to know this by examining stories contained in the Jatakas and Panchatantra.
- Strategies for increasing agricultural production
- use of plough with iron plough share, introduction of transplantation and use of irrigation through wells, tanks, less commonly canals.
- Land grants to religious institutions or Brahmanas, to extend agriculture to new areas or to win allies by making grants of land.
- Emergence of urban centres such as Pataliputra, Ujjayani, Puhar, Mathura etc.
- In the towns different types of people used to live such as washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, religious teachers, merchants, kings.
- Artisans and traders organized themselves in guild or shrenis.
- Trade both in the subcontinent and with east and north Africa, West Asia, South East Asia, China.
- India used to export spices, fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, medicinal plants.
- Exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of the coinage. Punch marked coins made of silver and copper were amongst the earliest to be minted and used. The first gold coins were issued (CE)by the Kushanas.
- James Prinsep an officer in the mint of the East India Company was able to decipher Ashokan Brahmi in 1838.
- Limitations of Inscriptional evidence letters are very faintly engraved, damaged or letter missing, not sure about the exact meaning of the words.

1. Prinsep and Piyadassi

- In the 1830s **James Prinsep**, an officer in the mint of the East India Company, deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi, two scripts used in the earliest inscriptions and coins. He found that most of these mentioned a king referred to as **Piyadassi** – meaning “pleasant to behold”.
- There were a few inscriptions which also referred to the king as Asoka, one of the most famous rulers known from Buddhist texts.



2. The Earliest States:

- **The sixteen mahajanapadas:** 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**. Although the lists vary, some names such as **Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara** and **Avanti** occur frequently. Clearly, 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*.
- 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**.
- some states acquired standing armies and maintained regular bureaucracies. Others continued to depend on militia, recruited, more often than not, from the peasantry.
- **First amongst the sixteen: Magadha:** Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, Magadha (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful mahajanapada.
- It was a region where agriculture was especially productive. Besides, it was also rich in natural resources and animals like elephant, which was an important part of the army, could be procured from the forest spreads of the region. Ganga and its tributaries provided a means of cheap and convenient communication.
- Magadha attributed its power to the policies of individuals: ruthlessly ambitious kings of whom **Bimbisara, Ajatasattu** and **Mahapadma Nanda** are the best known, and their ministers, who helped implement their policies.
- **Rajagaha** (the Prakrit name for present-day Rajgir in Bihar) was the capital of Magadha initially. In the fourth century BCE, the capital was shifted to Pataliputra, present-day Patna.

3. An Early Empire

- The growth of Magadha culminated in the emergence of the **Mauryan Empire**.
- **Chandragupta Maurya**, who founded the empire (c. 321 BCE), 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).

- **Sources of Mauryan Empire:** Account of Megasthenes (a Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya) called Indica, Arthashastra probably composed by Kautilya or Chanakya, the minister of Chandragupta, later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature. Besides, the inscriptions of Asoka (c. 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.
- **Dhamma:** Ashoka used the inscriptions to proclaim what he understood to be dhamma, which included respect towards elders, generosity towards Brahmanas and those who renounced worldly life, treating slaves and servants kindly, and respect for religions and traditions other than one's own. According to him, this would ensure the well-being of people in this world. Special officers known as dhamma mahamatta, were appointed to spread the message of dhamma.
- **Administering Centres:** There were five major political centres in the empire – the capital **Pataliputra** and the provincial centres of **Taxila**, **Ujjayini**, **Tosali** and **Suvarnagiri**.
- It is likely that administrative control was strongest in areas around the capital and the provincial centres. These were wisely chosen as 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.
- Megasthenes mentions a committee with six subcommittees for coordinating military activity.
- In the nineteenth century, the emergence of the Mauryan Empire was regarded as a major landmark, as India was under colonial rule during that time.
- Some of the archaeological finds associated with the Mauryas, including stone sculpture, were considered to be examples of the spectacular art typical of empires.
- Nationalist leaders in the twentieth century regarded Ashoka as an inspiring figure as the inscriptions suggested that was more powerful and industrious, as also more humble than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles.



4. New Notions of Kingship

- By the second century BCE, new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.
- This development was mainly seen in the Deccan and further south, including the chiefdoms of the **Cholas**, **Cheras** and **Pandys** 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.
- Many chiefs and kings, including the **Satavahanas** who ruled over parts of western and central India (c. second century BCE-second century CE) and the **Shakas**, a people of Central Asian origin who established kingdoms in the north-western and western parts of the subcontinent, derived revenues from long-distance trade.
- **Divine kings:** One means of claiming high status was to identify with a variety of deities. The **Kushanas** (c. first century BCE-first century CE), who ruled over a vast kingdom extending from Central Asia to northwest India followed this strategy. They adopted the title devaputra, or “son of god”, installed colossal statues in shrines.
- By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. These states depended on **samantas**, men who maintained themselves through local resources including control over land.
- The Prayaga Prashasti (also known as the Allahabad Pillar Inscription) composed in Sanskrit by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta, arguably the most powerful of the Gupta rulers (c. fourth century CE).

5. A Changing Countryside

- Popular perception: Anthologies such as the Jatakas and the Panchatantra gave a glimpse of subject-king relation. For instance, one story known as the Gandatindu Jataka describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king.
- Kings frequently tried to fill their coffers by demanding high taxes, and peasants particularly found such demands oppressive.
- Certain strategies aimed at increasing production to meet growing demand for taxes also were adopted. For example, 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. Also production of paddy was dramatically increased



by the introduction of transplantation.

- Another strategy adopted to increase agricultural production was the use of irrigation, through wells and tanks, and less commonly, canals.
- The benefits of increased production led to a growing differentiation amongst people engaged in agriculture as it was not equally distributed.
- The stories of Buddhist tradition refers to the term '**gahapati**' which was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. Tamil literature mentions large landowners or vellalar, ploughmen or uzhavar and slaves or adimai.
- With rising differences questions of control over land must have become crucial, as these were often discussed in legal texts.
- During early centuries of common era, grants of land were made and many of which were recorded in inscriptions. For instance, according to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have independent access to resources such as land.
- Land grants provide some insight into the relationship between cultivators and the state.

6. Towns and Trade

- Major towns were located along routes of communication. Some such as Pataliputra were on riverine routes. Some were near the coast, from where sea routes began. Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activities.
- A wide range of artefacts have been recovered from the excavations in these areas. These include 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, we find short votive inscriptions in a number of cities. Sometimes, guilds or shrenis, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well.
- From the sixth century BCE, land and river routes criss-crossed the subcontinent and extended in various directions. Rulers often attempted to control the routes, possibly by offering protection for a price.



- Those who traversed these routes included peddlers who probably travelled on foot and merchants who travelled with caravans of bullock carts and pack-animals.
- 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.
- Exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of coinage. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (c. sixth century BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used.
- Attempts were made to identify the symbols on punch-marked coins with specific ruling dynasties.
- 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 first gold coins were issued c. first century CE by the Kushanas. The widespread use of gold coins indicates the enormous value of the transactions that were taking place. Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. From c. sixth century CE onwards, finds of gold coins taper off.
- Coins were also issued by tribal republics such as that of the Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (c. first century CE).
- Hoards of Roman coins have been found from archaeological sites in south India. It is obvious that networks of trade were not confined within political boundaries: south India was not part of the Roman Empire, but there were close connections through trade.

7. How Are Inscriptions Deciphered?

- **Brahmi:** Most scripts used to write modern Indian languages are derived from Brahmi, the script used in most Asokan inscriptions. It was only after decades of painstaking investigations by several epigraphists that James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.
- **Kharosthi:** Kharosthi is the script used in inscriptions in the northwest. The coins of Indo-Greek kings, who ruled over the area (c. second-first centuries BCE), contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. European scholars who could read the former compared the letters. With Prinsep identifying



the language of the Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit, it became possible to read longer inscriptions as well.

- **Epigraphists** and **historians** after examining all these inscriptions, and finding that they match in terms of content, style, language and palaeography, come to a conclusion. Historians have to constantly assess statements made in inscriptions to judge whether they are true, plausible or exaggerations.

Time Line 2 Major Advance in Epigraphy	
Eighteen Century	
1784	Founding of the Asiatic Society (Bengali)
Nineteenth century	
1810s	Colin Mackenzie collects over 8,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian languages
1838	Decipherments of Asokan Brahmi by James Prinsep
1877	Alexander Caunningham publishes a set of asokan inscriptions
1886	First issue of Epigraphia carnatica, a journal of south Indian inscriptions
1888	First issue of Epigraphia Indica
Twentieth Century	
1965-66	D.C Sircar publishes Indian Epigraphy and Indian Epigraphical Glossary

- **Limitations:** However, it is probably evident that there are limits to what epigraphy can reveal. Sometimes, there are technical limitations, or inscriptions may be damaged or letters missing.
- Besides, it is not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions.
- Although several thousand inscriptions have been discovered, not all have been



deciphered, published and translated.

- Thus epigraphy alone does not provide a full understanding of political and economic history. Also, historians often question both old and new evidence.

Timeline:

Major Political and Economic Developments

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. 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

