

Chapter 2

Kings, Farmers and Towns Early States and Economies

- After the decline of Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), many significant changes took place in the Indian subcontinent.
- Vedas (Rigveda, Samveda, Yajurveda and Atharveda) and other religious and literary works are an invaluable source to know the history of that period.
- In first century BCE, many changes took place regarding the last rites of the dead in the central and south India. In this period dead bodies were buried in graves and these graves were surrounded by big stone called as the megaliths.
- In the 6th century BCE sixteen big kingdoms known as Mahajanapadas came into existence.
- Among these sixteen Mahajanapadas were-Magadha, Koshala, Vatsa and Avant which were the most powerful. .
- In the 5th century BCE, the powerful Mahajanapadas turned into powerful empires.
- Magadha was very powerful Mahajanapada. There were several causes responsible for it.
- Chandragupta Maurya was the founder of Mauryan Empire. He founded Mauryan Empire by defeating the last ruler of Nanda Dynasty, Mahajanapadas.
- Megasthenes's Indica and Kautilya's Arthashastra provided valuable information about the Mauryan Empire.
- After the death of Chandragupta Maurya's his son, Bindusara became the next ruler who ruled from 298 to 272 BCE.
- After Bindusara, Ashoka occupied the throne in 272 and ruled till 231 BCE.
- After the Kalinga War, Ashoka gave up policy of war and expansion.
- Inscriptions of Ashoka are the most relevant sources to know about Mauryan period. These inscriptions are written in the Brahmi (Prakrit) script.
- After the downfall of the Gupta Dynasty many new dynasties came up and ruled in many parts of India. Some of the dynasties were the Satvahanas, the Shakas, the Pandyas, the Cholas, Cheras and Kushanas.
- With the emergence of the Gupta, a new age started in the ancient Indian History.
- The founder of the Gupta Dynasty was Srigupta. He founded this dynasty in 275 CE and ruled till 300. After his death his son Ghatotkacha ruled from 300 CE to 320 CE.
- Ghatotkacha's successor Chandragupta I sat on the throne in 320 and assumed the title of Maharajadhiraja. He ruled till 335 CE.

- Sumudragupta is one of the greatest rulers of India and was the son of Chandragupta. He ruled from 335 to 375 CE. After his death Chandragupta-II ruled till 415.
- The Gupta ruler established a glorious empire with their untiring efforts. Their rule is called the Golden Age in Indian History. This vast Empire began to disintegrate at the end of the 5th century CE.

Development after the Harappan Civilization:

- After the decline of the Harappan Civilization, several developments, including the composition of Rigveda took place in Indian sub-continent. Evidences of emergence of agricultural settlements, pastoral communities and new modes of disposal of dead were found.
- The most important development was from 6th century BCE onwards when various empires and kingdoms emerged. In 1830, James Prinsep deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts used in earliest inscriptions and coins.
- Most of the inscriptions referred a king as Piyadassi, meant 'pleasant to behold' and a few inscriptions mentioned the king as Asoka, one of the most famous rulers known from Buddhist texts. It gave a new direction to investigate into early Indian political history, economic and social developments.

The Mahajanapadas:

- The earliest states emerged in the 6th century BCE which were mentioned in the early Buddhist and Jaina texts. The earliest 16 states were known as mahajanapadas. In which Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandliara and Avanti were most important. The mahajanapadas had a capital city, which was often fortified.
- Brahmanas began composing Dharmasutras from the 6th century BCE onwards. Magadha became the most powerful Mahajanapada. Bimbisara, Ajatashatru and Mahapadma Nanda were the most ambitious kings of Magadha. Magadha had its capital in Rajagaha (Rajgir) which was fortified and later the capital shifted to Pataliputra (Patna).

Mauryan Empire:

- Development of Magadha resulted in the emergence of the Mauryan empire founded by Chandragupta Maurya in 321 BCE. Besides sculptures, historians have used a variety of sources like written texts of Megasthenes, Kautilya (Arthashastra), Buddhist Jaina and Puranic literature, inscriptions of Asoka to reconstruct the history of Mauryan empire.
- Pataliputra, Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali, Suvarnagiri were the five major political centres of Mauryan empire.

- The vast empire was not controlled by a uniform administrative system. Asoka tried to hold his vast empire together by propagating dharma. He appointed special officers, known as the Dhamma Mahamatta, to spread the message of Dhamma.

Asokan Inscription:

- In deciphering Brahmi, the European scholars and Indian scholars compared Devanagari and Bengali scripts with Brahmi script. After painstaking work, James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.
- Kharosthi was deciphered by studying coins which had both Greek and Kharosthi scripts. Asoka was mentioned in the inscriptions as 'Devanampiya' meant 'beloved of the God' and 'Piyadassi' meant 'pleasant to behold'.
- From the Asokan inscription, we know the anguish of the ruler and the change in his attitude towards warfare. These inscriptions have been found in Odisha.

The Limitations of Inscriptions:

- There are technical limitations, like faintly engraved, damaged or missing letters in inscriptional evidence. Sometimes what we consider politically and economically significant was not recorded in the inscriptions.
- The content of inscriptions invariably projects the perspective of the person who commissioned these.
- The inscriptions are unable to reflect about the life of different social groups including the marginalised groups. Thus, new strategies of analysis should be adopted.

Emergence of Concept Kingship:

- Different rulers in the various parts of India established their empire. This gave rise to new kingdoms, new communities and towns.

Emergence of New Kingdoms:

- New kingdoms emerged in the Deccan and further South, including the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas. Satavahanas and Shakas derived revenues from long-distance trade. Kushanas ruled over a vast kingdom and considered themselves as God, adopting the title Devaputra (Son of God).
- Histories of the Gupta rulers were reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including Prashastis. The Prayaga Prashasti (also called Allahabad pillar inscription) by Harisena is the most important source to know about the Gupta rulers.

Emergence of New Communities:

- Historians examined stories of Jatakas and Panchatantra to know about the view of common people regarding the rulers. Strategies for increasing agricultural production were developed, including use of iron-tipped plough and the use of irrigation through wells and tanks.
- Advancement of agriculture led to emergence of different communities of people, viz, large landholders, small peasants and landless agricultural labourers. From early Tamil literature and Pali texts, categories of people like Gahapati (master of a household), Vellar (large land owners), Uzhavar (plough men) and Adimai (slaves) are known.
- Inscription gave details about the land grants to Brahmanas and Peasants. Prabhavati Gupta, daughter of Chandragupta II had access to land, which she later granted, but common women had no access to lands. Some historians think that land grant is a strategy to extend agriculture to new areas; others thought it as the indication of weakening of political power.

Emergence of Towns and Trade:

- Several urban centres emerged in the sub-continent from the 6th century' BCE. People living in these areas traded artefacts like fine pottery known as Northern black polished ware, ornaments, tools, weapons, vessels, figurines made of gold, silver, copper, bronze, ivory, glass, shell and teracotta.
- Guilds or Shrenis procured raw materials, regulated production and marketed the finished product. The trade extended beyond the sub-continent, Central Asia, East and North Africa, South-East Asia and China.
- Successful merchants, designated as Masattuvan in Tamil, Set this and Satavahanas in Prakrit became very' rich. Exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of silver, copper and gold coins.
- 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 sub-continent in 2nd century BCE.
- The first gold coins were issued in 1st century' CE by the Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. From the 6th century CE onwards, the use of gold coins was reduced

Important Terms:

- Janapada: The land where the people belonging to a clan or tribe had settled.
- Dhammo Mahanatta: Officer appointed by Ashoka to spread the message of his Dharma.
- Matriliney: This term is used when descent is traced through mother.
- Tamilakam: The name of the ancient Tamil country which included the parts of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.
- Megaliths: Stone structures which were built by some communities of South India over the grave of the dead.
- Vellators: The big zamindars.
- Agrahara: The land which Brahmanas got as land grants.

Time Line:

- 600-500: BCE Emergence of Mahajanapadas
- 544-492: BCE Reign of Bimbisara
- 492-460: BCE Tenure of Ajatsatru
- 269-231: BCE Reign of Ashoka
- 201: BCE Kalinga war was fought
- 335-375: BCE Reign of Sumudragupta
- 375-415: CE Reign of Chandragupta-II
- 1784: Asiatic Society (Bengal) was founded
- 1810: Colin Mackenzie collects over 8,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian languages.
- 1838: Brahmi script James Prinsept deciphered.
- 1877: Alexander Cunningham published a set of Asokan inscriptions.
- 1886: First issue of Epigraphia Camatica, journal of South Indian inscriptions.
- 1888: First issue of Epigraphia Indica.
- 1965-66: D.C. Sircar published Indian Epigraphy and Indian Epigraphical Glossary.