

PART-1 THEME-TWO

Kings, Farmers and Towns (Early States and Economies)

Developments between 1900 BCE and 600 BCE

* During the period between 1900 BCE and 600 BCE the *Rigveda* was composed by people living along the Indus and its tributaries.

* During this period **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.

* During this period new modes of disposal of the dead, including the making of elaborate stone structures known as megaliths, emerged in central and south India from the first millennium BCE.

Sources to understand Early Indian History (600 BCE to 600 BCE)

- Historians attempt to understand early Indian history (600 BCE to 600 BCE) by drawing on a range of sources – inscriptions, texts, coins and visual material.
- 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.

The 6th C. BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history.

- It is an era associated with **emergence of Sixteen Mahajanapadas**.
- It is an era associated with early **states, cities**.
- It is an era associated with the **growing use of iron**.
- It is an era associated with the **development of coinage**.
- It is witnessed the growth of **diverse systems of thought (Religions)** including Buddhism and Jainism.

The main features of sixteen mahajanapadas

- While most mahajanapadas were **ruled by kings** some were **oligarchies** which were known as **ganas or sanghas**, where power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called **rajas**.
- Each mahajanapada had a **capital city**, which was **often fortified**.
- Each mahajanapada had a **well maintained standing army** and regular bureaucracies for administration.
- **Dharmasutras, written by Brahmins laid down norms for rulers**. Rulers were ideally expected to be Kshatriyas.

- Rulers were advised **to collect taxes** and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans. They were allowed to raid on neighbouring states which were recognised as a legitimate means of acquiring wealth.

Magadha the most powerful mahajanapada

- Magadha was a region where agriculture was especially productive.
- In **Magadha iron mines** were accessible and provided resources for tools and weapons.
- **Elephants**, an important component of the army, were found in forests in the region.
- The **Ganga and its tributaries** provided a means of cheap and **convenient communication**.
- The **ambitious kings** of whom Bimbisara, Ajatasattu and Mahapadma Nanda are the best known, and their ministers, who helped implement their policies.

Sources to understand Mauryan Empire

- Historians have used a variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire.
- Contemporary works, such as the account of Megasthenes- (a Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya), called **Indica** , which survives in fragments.
- Another source that is often used is the **Arthashastra**, parts of which were probably composed by **Kautilya or Chanakya**, traditionally believed to be the minister of Chandragupta.
- Besides, the Mauryas are mentioned in later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature, as well as in Sanskrit literary works.
- The **inscriptions of Asoka** on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.

The extend of 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)”.

Administration of Mauryan Empire

- * There were **five major political centres** in the empire – the capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri, all mentioned in Asokan inscriptions.
- * It is likely that 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.

* 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. Of these, one subcommittee 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**

* Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating *dhamma*, by appointing Special officers, known as the *dhammamahamatta*, were appointed to spread the message of *dhamma*.

* *Dhamma Policy* 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.

How important was the Empire/The emergence of the Mauryan Empire as a major landmark in Early Indian History

- The emergence of the Mauryan Empire was regarded as a major landmark. **Mauryan Empire ruled India for about 150 years.** It **extended control** as far northwest as Afghanistan and Baluchistan and in the south up to Andhra Pradesh.
- Some of the archaeological finds associated with the Mauryas, including stone sculpture, were considered to be examples of the **spectacular art** typical of empires.
- Many of these historians found the message on Asokan inscriptions very different from that of most other rulers, suggesting that **Asoka was more powerful, industrious and humble** than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles.

NEW NOTIONS OF KINGSHIP IN EARLY INDIAN HISTORY.

- The new kingdoms that emerged in the south, including the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas.
- Many chiefs and kings, including the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western and central India and the Shakas, a people of **Central Asian origin**.
- Who established kingdoms in the northwestern and western parts of the subcontinent **claimed social status in a variety of ways such as rituals and marriage alliances**.
- Some historians feel that the **Kushanas considered themselves godlike**. Many Kushana rulers also adopted the title *devaputra*, or “son of god”.
- Gupta encouraged poets to compose poems in praise of them. While historians often attempt to draw factual information from such compositions, they found that rulers were compared as **equal to Gods**.

➤ In the **Allahabad Pillar inscription**(composed in Sanskrit by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta) Samudragupta was compared with Gods.

CHANGING COUNTRYSIDE OR CONDITION OF VILLAGES IN THE EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD

Popular perceptions of kings

- * Historians have tried to reconstruct life in the country side with the help of the **Jatakas and the Panchatantra**. One story known as the **Gandatindu Jataka** describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king.
- * When the king went in disguise to find out what his subjects thought about him, each one of them cursed him for their miseries, complaining that they were **attacked by robbers at night and by tax collectors during the day**.
- * To escape from this situation, **people abandoned their village** and went to live in the forest.
- * As this story indicates the relationship between a king and his subjects, kings frequently tried to fill their coffers by **demanding high taxes**, and peasants particularly found such demands oppressive.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

- One such strategy to increase agricultural production was the **shift to plough agriculture**.
- The **iron-tipped ploughshare** was used to turn the alluvial soil in areas which had high.
- In some parts of the Ganga valley, production of paddy was dramatically increased by the **introduction of transplantation**, although this meant back-breaking work for the producer.
- Areas which were semi-arid, such as parts of Punjab and Rajasthan and those living in hilly tracts in the northeastern and central parts of the subcontinent **practiced 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**, which were constructed by kings and communities.

DIFFERENCES IN RURAL SOCIETY

- There was a **growing differentiation** amongst people engaged in agriculture were based on differential access to **land, labour** and some of the new technologies.
- In the country side of Northern India people were divided into **three groups - landless agricultural labourers, small peasants**, as well as

large landholders. The term *gahapati* was often used as head of the family. (to designate the second and third categories).

- Early **Sangam texts** also mention different categories of people engaged in agriculture were based on differential access to land.
- In south India people who were divided into three groups– large landowners or *vellalar*, ploughmen or *uzhavar* and slaves or *adimai*.

LAND GRANTS AND NEW RURAL ELITES

- The land grants were made to religious institutions, Brahmanas & *samantas*
- **Prabhavati Gupta** was the daughter of Chandragupta II, one of the most important rulers in Indian history. According to Sanskrit legal texts, **women were not supposed to have independent access** to resources such as land.
- The inscription indicates that **Prabhavati had access to land**, which she then granted. This may have been because she was a queen and her situation was therefore exceptional.
- Some Historians feel that land grants were part of a strategy adopted by ruling lineages **to extend agriculture** to new areas.
- Others suggest that when **kings were losing control over their *samantas***, they **tried to win allies by donating lands to people**.

TOWNS AND TRADE IN EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD

New cities

> Many urban centres emerged in several parts of the subcontinent from c. sixth century BCE. As we have seen, many of these were capitals of *mahajanapadas*.

> Virtually many major towns were located along routes of trade and communication.

> Some of the cities were located on riverine routes, others were along land routes and yet others were near the coast.

> Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activities.

Urban populations

- **Kings and ruling elites** lived in fortified cities. People who lived in towns were washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants etc.
- Inscriptions mention about **guilds or *shrenis***, **organisations of craft producers and merchants**. These guilds probably procured raw materials, regulated production, and marketed the finished products.

Trade in the subcontinent and beyond

- From the 6th century BCE, **land and riverine routes** extended in various directions which connected all the parts of India.
- Rulers often attempted to control these routes, possibly by offering **protection for a price (by tax)**. Those who used these routes included peddlers who probably travelled on foot and merchants who travelled with caravans of bullock carts and pack-animals.
- Successful merchants of south India, designated as *masattuvan* in Tamil and *setthisandsatthavaha* in Prakrit, could become enormously rich.
- A **wide range of goods** were carried from one place to another – salt, grain, cloth, metal ores, finished products, stone, timber, medicinal plants, spices, especially pepper, etc.

Coins and kings

- **Exchanges were facilitated** by the introduction of **coinage**. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (c. 6th c. BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used by many dynasties including the Mauryas.
- 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 2c BCE.
- The **first gold coins** were issued in the 1c CE by the Kushanas. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued by Roman emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran.
- **Coins were also issued by tribal republics** of Punjab and Haryana called the Yaudheyas.
- Some of the **most spectacular gold coins** were issued by the **Gupta rulers**. The earliest coins issued by Guptas were **remarkable for their purity**. These coins facilitated long-distance transactions from which kings also benefited.
- From c. 6th c onwards historians are divided into two groups on this issue. Some suggest that with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire long-distance trade between India and Rome declined, and this affected the prosperity of India and trading communities.
- Some scholars point out that though **finds of coins were few** but coins continue to be mentioned in inscriptions and texts.
- Some historians suggest that people might have **recycled the old coins** for other purposes.

BRAHMI AND KHAROSTHI INSCRIPTIONS DECIPHERED

- **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. This gave a new direction to investigations into early Indian political history.
- James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.

- **Kharosthi**, the script used in inscriptions and coins in the northwestern part of India by **Indo-Greek kings**. Indo-Greek coins contain the names of kings written in **Greek and Kharosthi** scripts. European scholars who could read the Greek script compared the letters.
- Prinsep identified the language of the **Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit** and it became possible to read longer inscriptions.
- James Prinsep found that **Brahmi script is older form of Devanagari** script. James Prinsep matched the inscriptions in terms of content, style, language and paleography.
- He also discovered that Asoka is the name of the ruler and **devanampiya** and **piyadassi are titles** used for Asoka in many inscriptions. They noted Asoka, devanampiya and piyadassi are different names of the same ruler.

THE LIMITATIONS OF INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE OR PROBLEMS FACED BY EPIGRAPHISTS (Text book 5 question)

- * There are technical limitations in studying the Inscriptions. In some inscriptions **letters are very faintly engraved**.
- * **Some inscriptions are damaged** and in some inscriptions **letters are missing**.
- * Besides, it is **not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions**, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time. This has to be done carefully, to ensure that the intended meaning of the author is not changed.
- * Several thousand inscriptions were made but only some hundreds have been **discovered in which all are not deciphered, published and translated**.
- * There is another more fundamental problem. Politically and economically significant matters are recorded in inscriptions **but routine agricultural practices and the joys and sorrows of daily existence are not found in inscriptions**.
- * Historians and Epigraphists have to constantly assess statements made in inscriptions to judge whether they are true, plausible or exaggerations.

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