



AN INITIATIVE BY  
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**CLASS XII**  
**THEMES IN INDIAN HISTORY**  
**PART I**  
**NCERT GIST**

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# 1

## BRICKS, BEADS AND BONES

- The Indus valley civilisation is also called the Harappan culture.
- It started flourishing along River Indus (now in Pakistan) at around 2600 B.C.
- Harappan civilization was the largest Bronze age civilization in the world
- Harappa was the first site of this civilization discovered by archaeologist. It was an urban civilization. Its writing is not deciphered
- After 1900 B.C., most of the sites were abandoned due to some reasons. By 1900 B.C. major part of the civilization ended
- The Harappan seal is possibly the most distinctive artefact of the Harappan or Indus valley civilisation. Made of a stone called steatite, seals often contain animal motifs and signs from a script that remains undeciphered.
- Some important sites of Harappan civilization are Kalibangan, Lothal, Rakhi Garhi, Dholavira, Rupar, Harappa, Ganeriwala, Chanhudaro, Sutakagen Dor, Mohenjodaro, Balakot, Kot Diji, Amri, Rangpur, Nageshwar, Ganeriwala etc.

### Period of Harappan Civilization

- The civilization is dated between 2600 BCE and 1900 BCE
- The period of the civilization is broadly divided in to three:
  - i. The Early Harappan culture (Before 2600 BCE)
  - ii. The Mature Harappan culture (2600 BCE to 1900 BCE)
  - iii. The Late Harappan culture (After 1900)

### 1. Beginnings of Early archaeological cultures

- There were several archaeological cultures in the region prior to the Mature Harappan.
- These cultures were associated with distinctive pottery, evidence of agriculture, pastoralism and some crafts.
- The settlements were small in size and had no large buildings.
- It appears that there was a break between the Early Harappan and the Harappan civilisation, evident from large-scale burning at some sites, as well as the abandonment of certain settlements.

### 2. Subsistence Strategies

- The Harappans ate a wide range of plant and animal products, including fish. Subsistence strategies of the people included hunting and gathering, cultivation, pastoralism, and distribution.
- Terracotta models of oxen, plough etc., show that people relied on agriculture.
- Different types of food available to the people
  - ▶ Archaeologists found grain such as wheat, barley, lentils, chickpea and sesame at the Harappan sites.
  - ▶ In Gujarat, Millets have been found. Rice was found rarely.
- Animal bones found at Harappan sites include those of cattle, sheep, goat, buffalo and pig indicate that these animals were domesticated. There are evidences of bones of animals which prove that people consumed meat.

- Bones of wild species such as boar, deer and gharial are also found. Studies indicate that these animals were either domesticated or hunted by the Harappans.
- Bones of fish and fowl are also found.

### **Agricultural Technologies**

- The prevalence of agriculture is indicated by finds of grains.
- It is more difficult to reconstruct actual agricultural practices carried out by the Harappans.
- Terracotta sculptors of the bull and their representation on the seals indicate that bull was known to them.
- From this, the archaeologists assume that the oxen were used for ploughing.
- Moreover, the Archaeologists have also found terracotta models of the plough at sites in Cholistan and at Banwali (Haryana).
- Evidence of a ploughed field, associated with early Harappan levels have also found at Kalibangan (Rajasthan). The field had two sets of furrows at right angles to each other, suggesting that two different crops were grown together.
- Most Harappan sites are located in semi-arid lands, where irrigation was probably required for agriculture. Traces of canals have been found at the Harappan site of Shortughai in Afghanistan, but not in Punjab or Sind.
- It is also likely that water drawn from wells was used for irrigation.
- Besides, water reservoirs found in Dholavira (Gujarat) may have been used to store water for agriculture.

### **3. Mohenjo-Daro, A Planned Urban Centre**

- The settlement is divided into two sections, one smaller but higher and the other much larger but lower.
- These are designated as
  - i. The Citadel**
    - ▶ The Citadel owes its height to the fact that buildings were constructed on mud brick platforms. It was walled, which meant that it was physically separated from the Lower Town
  - ii. The Lower Town**
    - ▶ The Lower Town was also walled. Several buildings were built on platforms, which served as foundations.
- Labour was mobilized at a very large scale.
- The settlement was first planned and then implemented.
- Sun Dried or Baked bricks used in the buildings were uniform in size.

### **Laying out drains**

- The roads and streets in the lower town were laid out along an approximate “grid” pattern, intersecting at right angles.
- The streets and drains were first laid out and then houses were built on the same pattern.
- One of the most distinctive features of Harappan cities was the carefully planned **drainage system**.
  - ▶ Drainage systems were not unique to the larger cities, but were found in smaller settlements as well.
  - ▶ Every house was connected to the street drains. The drains were made of mortar, lime and gypsum.
  - ▶ They were covered with big bricks which could be lifted easily to clean the drains.
  - ▶ For sewage from the houses, pits were provided at either side of the street. Very long drainage channels were provided at intervals with sumps for cleaning.

- ▶ They were covered with big bricks which could be lifted easily to clean the drains.
- ▶ Little heaps of materials mostly sand have frequently been found alongside the drains. This shows that the drains were cleaned at regular intervals.
- ▶ At Lothal for example, while houses were built of mud bricks, drains were made of burnt bricks

### **Domestic architecture**

- The Lower Town of Mohenjodaro provides examples of residential buildings.
- Many were centered on a courtyard, with rooms on all sides. The courtyard was probably the center of activities such as cooking and weaving, particularly during hot and dry weather.
- There were no windows along the walls on the ground floor and the main entrance did not provide view of courtyard and interior. So, privacy could be maintained.
- Every house had bathroom paved with bricks which was connected through the wall to the street drains.
- Some houses have remains of staircases to reach second storey or roof.
- Many houses had wells which were reachable from outside for the use of outsiders.

### **The Citadel**

- It is on the Citadel that we find evidence of structures that were probably used for special public purposes.
- These include
  1. The warehouse – a massive structure of which the lower brick portions remain, while the upper portions, probably of wood, decayed long ago
  2. The Great Bath.

### **The Great Bath**

- On citadel, some special buildings were built like 'The great bath of Mohenjodaro'. Such buildings were used on some religious occasions or on public gatherings
- The Great Bath was a large rectangular tank in a courtyard surrounded by a corridor on all four sides.
- There were two flights of steps on the north and south leading into the tank, which was made watertight by setting bricks on edge and using a mortar of gypsum.
- There were rooms on three sides, in one of which was a large well.
- Water from the tank flowed into a huge drain.
- Across a lane to the north lay a smaller building with eight bathrooms, four on each side of a corridor, with drains from each bathroom connecting to a drain that ran along the corridor.

## **4. Tracking Social Differences**

### **Burials**

- At burials in Harappan sites the dead were generally laid in pits.
- Some of the pits were lined with bricks.
- Some graves contain pottery and ornaments, perhaps indicating a belief that these could be used in the afterlife.
- Jewellery has been found in burials of both men and women which mean that both men and women used ornaments.
- In some instances, the dead were buried with copper mirrors.
- But in general, it appears that the Harappans did not believe in burying precious things with the dead.

## Artefacts

- Another strategy to identify social differences is to study artefacts, which is broadly classified

### 1. Utilitarian

- ▶ This includes objects of daily use made fairly easily out of ordinary materials such as stone or clay.
- ▶ These include querns, pottery, needles, flesh-rubbers (body scrubbers), etc., and are usually found distributed throughout settlements.

### 2. Luxuries

- ▶ Objects were luxuries if they are rare or made from costly, non-local materials or with complicated technologies.
- ▶ Little pots of faience (a material made of ground sand or silica mixed with colour and a gum and then fired) were probably considered precious because they were difficult to make.
- ▶ Rare objects made of valuable materials are generally concentrated in large settlements like Mohenjodaro and Harappa and are rarely found in the smaller settlements.
- ▶ For example, miniature pots of faience, perhaps used as perfume bottles, are found mostly in Mohenjodaro and Harappa, and there are none from small settlements like Kalibangan.
- ▶ Gold too was rare, and as at present, probably precious - all the gold jewellery found at Harappan sites was recovered from hoards.

## 5. Craft Production

- Chanhudaro is a tiny settlement almost exclusively devoted to craft production, including bead-making, shell-cutting, metal-working, seal-making and weight-making.
- The variety of materials used to make beads are
  - ▶ Stones like carnelian (of a beautiful red colour), jasper, crystal, quartz and steatite
  - ▶ Metals like copper, bronze and gold
  - ▶ Shell, faience and terracotta or burnt clay

### Techniques of making beads

- ▶ Some beads were made of two or more stones, cemented together, some of stone with gold caps.
- ▶ They were made in different shapes such as cylindrical, spherical, barrel-shaped, and segmented.
- ▶ Some were decorated by incising or painting, and some had designs etched onto them.
- ▶ Steatite, a very soft stone, was easily worked. Some beads were moulded out of a paste made with steatite powder. This permitted making a variety of shapes, unlike the geometrical forms made out of harder stones.
- ▶ Special tools were used for craft work.
- ▶ Grinding, polishing and drilling completed the process.
- ▶ Specialised drills have been found at Chanhudaro, Lothal and at Dholavira.
- ▶ These were specialised centres for making shell objects - including bangles, ladles and inlay - which were taken to other settlements.
- ▶ Similarly, it is likely that finished products (such as beads) from Chanhudaro and Lothal were taken to the large urban centres such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

### Centres of production

- ▶ In order to identify centres of craft production, archaeologists usually look for the following
  1. Raw material such as stone nodules, whole shells, copper ore
  2. Tools
  3. Unfinished objects
  4. Rejects and waste material - waste is one of the best indicators of craft work

### 6. Strategies for procuring materials for craft production

- A variety of materials was used for craft production. While some such as clay were locally available, many such as stone, timber and metal had to be procured from outside the alluvial plain.
- Terracotta toy models of bullock carts suggest that this was one important means of transporting goods and people across land routes.
- Riverine routes along the Indus and its tributaries, as well as coastal routes were also probably used.

### Materials from the subcontinent and beyond

- The Harappans procured materials for craft production in various ways.
- They established settlements such as
  1. Nageshwar and Balakot in areas where shell was available.
  2. Shortughai, in far-off Afghanistan, near the best source of lapis lazuli, a blue stone that was apparently very highly valued
  3. Lothal which was near sources of carnelian (from Bharuch in Gujarat)
  4. Steatite (from south Rajasthan and north Gujarat)
  5. Metal (from Rajasthan).
- Another strategy for procuring raw materials may have been to send expeditions to areas such as
  1. Khetri region of Rajasthan (for copper)
    - ▶ There is evidence in the Khetri area for what archaeologists call the Ganeshwar-Jodhpura culture, with its distinctive non-Harappan pottery and an unusual wealth of copper objects. It is possible that the inhabitants of this region supplied copper to the Harappans.
  2. South India (for gold)
    - ▶ These expeditions established communication with local communities.

### Contact with Distant lands

- Archaeological finds suggest that the Harappans maintained long distance trade.
- Copper was probably brought from Oman, on the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. A distinctive type of vessel, a large Harappan jar coated with a thick layer of black clay has been found at Omani sites. Mesopotamian texts refer to copper coming from a region called Magan, perhaps a name for Oman,
- Other archaeological finds suggestive of long-distance contacts include Harappan seals, weights, dice and beads.
- Mesopotamian texts mention contacts with regions named Dilmun (probably the island of Bahrain), Magan and Meluhha, possibly the Harappan region.
- It is likely that communication with Oman, Bahrain or Mesopotamia was by sea. Mesopotamian texts refer to Meluhha as a land of seafarers. Besides, we find depictions of ships and boats on seals.
- The round "Persian Gulf" seal found in Bahrain sometimes carries Harappan motifs. Interestingly, local "Dilmun" weights followed the Harappan standard.

## 7. Seals, Script, Weights

### Seals and Sealings

- Seals and Sealings were used to facilitate long distance communication.
- The sealing established the identity of the sender in trade.

### An Enigmatic Script

- Harappan seals usually have a line of writing, probably containing the name and title of the owner.
- The seal had a motif (generally an animal) which conveyed a meaning to those who could not read.
- Seals were basically used to convey the identity of the sender and to facilitate long distance communication.
- The Harappan inscriptions are short and has too many signs.
- The script was not alphabetical and written right to left.

### Weights

- Exchangers were regulated by a precise system of weights usually made of a stone called chert (a kind of stone, generally cubical with no markings).
- Lower denominations of weights were binary (1, 2,4,8,16,32 etc.), while the higher denominations followed the decimal system.
- The smaller weights were probably used for weighing jewellery and beads.
- Metal scale-pans have also been found.

## 8. Ancient Authority

- There are indications of complex decisions being taken and implemented in Harappan society.
  - ▶ Labour was mobilised for making bricks and for the construction of massive walls and platforms.

### Palaces and kings

- ▶ A large building found at Mohenjodaro was labelled as a palace by archaeologists but no spectacular finds were associated with it. A stone statue was labelled and continues to be known as the “priest-king”. This is because archaeologists were familiar with Mesopotamian history and its “priest-kings” and have found parallels in the Indus region.
- ▶ Some archaeologists are of the opinion that Harappan society had no rulers, and that everybody enjoyed equal status.
- ▶ Others feel there was no single ruler but several, that Mohenjodaro had a separate ruler, Harappa another, and so forth.
- ▶ Other argue that there was a single state, given the similarity in artefacts as evident in pottery, the evidence for planned settlements, the standardised ratio of brick size, and the establishment of settlements near sources of raw material.

## 9. The End of Civilisation

The Evidences that reflected the disappearance of Harappan civilization by 1800 BCE.

- ▶ There is evidence that by c. 1800 BCE most of the Mature Harappan sites in regions such as Cholistan had been abandoned.
- ▶ There was an expansion of population into new settlements in Gujarat, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh.
- ▶ In the few Harappan sites that continued to be occupied after 1900 BCE there appears to have been a transformation of material culture, marked by the disappearance of the distinctive artefacts of the civilisation – weights, seals, special beads.



- ▶ Writing, long-distance trade, and craft specialisation also disappeared.
- ▶ House construction techniques deteriorated and large public structures were no longer produced. Overall, artefacts and settlements indicate a rural way of life in what are called “Late Harappan” or “successor cultures”

### Several reasons for the decline of Harappan civilization

- Several explanations have been put forward.
- These range from climatic change, deforestation, excessive floods, the shifting and/or drying up of rivers, to overuse of the landscape. Some of these “causes” may hold for certain settlements, but they do not explain the collapse of the entire civilisation.
- It appears that a strong unifying element, perhaps the Harappan state, came to an end. This is evidenced by the disappearance of seals, the script, distinctive beads and pottery, the shift from a standardised weight system to the use of local weights; and the decline and abandonment of cities.

## 10. Discovering the Harappan Civilisation

### Cunningham’s confusion

- Cunningham was the first Director General of ASI (Archaeological Survey of India).
- He used the accounts left by Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who had visited the subcontinent between the fourth and seventh centuries CE to locate early settlements.
- Cunningham also collected, documented and translated inscriptions found during his surveys. When he excavated sites, he tended to recover artefacts that he thought had cultural value.
- A site like Harappa, which was not part of the itinerary of the Chinese pilgrims and was not known as an Early Historic city, did not fit very neatly within his framework of investigation. So, although Harappan artefacts were found fairly often during the nineteenth century and some of these reached Cunningham, he did not realise how old these were.

### A new old civilisation

- Daya Ram Sahni and Rakhil Das Banerji found similar seals at Harappa and Mohenjodaro respectively
- Based on these finds, in 1924, John Marshall, Director General of the ASI, announced the discovery of a new civilization in the Indus valley to the world.
- Marshall tended to excavate along regular horizontal units, measured uniformly throughout the mound, ignoring stratigraphy of the site.
- This meant that all the artefacts recovered from the same unit were grouped together, even if they were found at different stratigraphic layers.
- As a result, valuable information about the context of these finds was irretrievably lost.
- R.E.M Wheeler rectified this problem. He recognized that it was necessary to follow the stratigraphy of the mound rather than dig mechanically along uniform horizontal lines

## 11. Problems of Piecing together the Past

- Harappan script is not helpful in understanding the Harappan civilization. The script remains undeciphered till date. Material remains help the archaeologists to reconstruct Harappan life.
- It is also important to remember that only broken or useless objects would have been thrown away. Other things would probably have been recycled. Consequently, valuable artefacts that are found intact were either lost in the past or hoarded and never retrieved. In other words, such finds are accidental rather than typical.

### Classifying finds

- One simple principle of classification is in terms of material, such as stone, clay, metal, bone, ivory, etc.
- The second, and more complicated, is in terms of function: archaeologists have to decide whether, for instance, an artefact is a tool or an ornament, or both, or something meant for ritual use.
- An understanding of the function of an artefact is often shaped by its resemblance with present-day things – beads, querns, stone blades and pots are obvious examples.
- Sometimes, archaeologists have to take recourse to indirect evidence. For instance, though there are traces of cotton at some Harappan sites, to find out about clothing we have to depend on indirect evidence including depictions in sculpture.

### Problems of interpretation

- The problems of archaeological interpretation are perhaps most evident in attempts to reconstruct religious practices.
- Early archaeologists thought that certain objects which seemed unusual or unfamiliar may have had a religious significance. These included terracotta figurines of women, heavily jeweled, some with elaborate head-dresses. These were regarded as mother goddesses. Rare stone statuary of men in an almost standardised posture, seated with one hand on the knee – such as the “priest-king” – was also similarly classified.
- In other instances, structures have been assigned ritual significance. These include the Great Bath and fire altars found at Kalibangan and Lothal.

### Reconstruction of religion beliefs

- Attempts have also been made to reconstruct religious beliefs and practices by examining seals, some of which seem to depict ritual scenes. Others, with plant motifs, are thought to indicate nature worship.
- Some animals – such as the one-horned animal, often called the “unicorn” – depicted on seals seem to be mythical, composite creatures. In some seals, a figure shown seated cross-legged in a “yogic” posture, sometimes surrounded by animals, has been regarded as a depiction of “proto-Shiva”, that is, an early form of one of the major deities of Hinduism. Besides, conical stone objects have been classified as lingas.

### KEY WORDS

- Shamans are men and women who claim magical and healing powers, as well as an ability to communicate with the other world.
- Hoards are objects kept carefully by people, often inside containers such as pots.
- Saddle querns were the only means of grinding cereals and pulses. They were made of hard, gritty rock or sandstone. The remains of saddle querns show signs of hard usage.
- Curry stones: The type of quern in which the second stone was used as pounder, which eventually made a cavity in the base stone was called curry stones. This type was possibly used only for pounding herbs and spices for making curries.
- Chert: Chert was a type of stone, generally cubical with no markings. It was used in the system of weight by the people of Harappan people.

# 2

## Kings, Farmers and Towns Early States and Economies (c. 600 BCE-600 CE)

- There were several changes in economic and political life between 600BCE and 600 CE. The most important was the emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms. There were other changes as well like growth in agricultural production, emergence of new towns etc.
- Historians tried to understand these changes by using a variety of sources-Inscriptions, texts coins etc. This is a complex process and sources do not tell the entire story.
- **Some developments during the long span of 1500 years following the end of harappan civilization. They are:**
  - ▶ Rig-Veda was composed along the Indus and its tributaries
  - ▶ Agricultural settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent.
  - ▶ There is evidence of pastoral populations in the Deccan and further south.
  - ▶ New modes of disposal of the dead, including the making of elaborate stone structures known as megaliths, emerged in central and south India.
  - ▶ The emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms.
  - ▶ Agricultural production was organised.
  - ▶ New towns appeared almost throughout the subcontinent.

### 1. Princep and Piyadassi

- 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 sixth century BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history. It is an era associated with early states, cities, the growing use of iron, the development of coinage, etc. It also witnessed the growth of diverse systems of thought, including Buddhism and Jainism.

### The sixteen Mahajanpadas

- Early Buddhist and Jaina texts mention, amongst other things, sixteen states known as 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.

- Maintaining these fortified cities as well as providing for incipient armies and bureaucracies required resources.
- Brahmanas began composing Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras, from c. sixth BCE. 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.
- Raids on neighbouring states were recognised as a legitimate means of acquiring wealth.
- Gradually, some states acquired standing armies and maintained regular bureaucracies.

#### **First amongst the sixteen: Magadha**

Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, Magadha (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful mahajanapada. This development is due to

- Magadha was a region where agriculture was especially productive.
- 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.
- The Ganga and its tributaries provided a means of cheap and convenient communication.
- Early Buddhist and Jaina writers who wrote about 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.

#### **Capitals**

- ▶ Initially, Rajagaha (the Prakrit name for present-day Rajgir in Bihar) was the capital of Magadha which means “house of the king”. Rajagaha was a fortified settlement, located amongst hills.
- ▶ In the fourth century BCE, the capital was shifted to Pataliputra, present-day Patna, commanding routes of communication along the Ganga.

### **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 to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire**

- It includes archaeological finds, especially sculpture.
- Contemporary works, such as the account of Megasthenes (a Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya), 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.
- The Mauryas are mentioned in later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature, as well as in Sanskrit literary works.
- The inscriptions of Asoka (c. 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.

#### **Ashokan Inscription**

- ▶ Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his subjects and officials on stone surfaces – natural rocks as well as polished pillars.

- ▶ He used the inscriptions to proclaim what he understood to be dhamma. This 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.

### **Features of Mauryan administration as mentioned in the Ashokan Inscriptions**

The Mauryan king was the centre of the great administrative system. He enjoyed absolute power. The vast empire was divided into number of provinces. The Mauryans had a strong standing army.

#### **1. Five Major Political Centres**

- ▶ The capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri, all mentioned in Ashokan 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, 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 empire.

#### **2. Role of the sub committees**

- Megasthenes mentions a committee with six subcommittees for coordinating military activity.
  - ▶ First looked after the navy
  - ▶ Second managed transport and provisions
  - ▶ Third was responsible for foot-soldier
  - ▶ The fourth for horses
  - ▶ The fifth for chariots
  - ▶ 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.

#### **3. Measures of Asoka to hold his empire**

- Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating dhamma.
- This, according to him, would ensure the well-being of people in this world and the next.
- Special officers, known as the dhamma mahamatta, were appointed to spread the message of dhamma.

#### **4. New notions of kingship (Post-Mauryan period)**

##### **Chiefs and kings in the South**

- The new kingdoms that emerged in the Deccan and further south, including the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam.
- Many chiefs and kings, including the Satavahana 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. This strategy is best exemplified by the Kushanas (c. first century BCE first century CE), who ruled over a vast kingdom extending from

Central Asia to northwest India. Huge Statues of Kushan rulers have been found in U.P and Afghanistan. They claimed divine status and adopted the title devaputra, or 'son of god'.

- By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. Many of these depended on samantas, men who maintained themselves through local resources including control over land. They 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. Histories of the Gupta rulers have been reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including prashastis, composed in praise of kings in particular, and patrons in general, by poets.
- 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 perceptions of kings

- Inscriptions do not provide all the answers. In fact, ordinary people rarely left accounts of their thoughts and experiences.
- Historians have tried to solve this problem by examining stories contained in anthologies such as the Jatakas and the Panchatantra. Many of these stories probably originated as popular oral tales that were later committed to writing.
- The Jatakas were written in Pali around the middle of the first millennium CE.
- The jataka story called Gandatindu Jataka indicates the strained relationship between kings and subjects. Kings demanded high taxes and peasants opposed to this.

### Strategies for increasing production

- Use of iron tipped ploughshare to turn the alluvial soil in areas which had high rainfall such as those of the Ganga and the Kaveri from c. sixth century BCE
- Introduction of transplantation of paddy dramatically increased the production of paddy
- Irrigation through wells, tanks and canals
- Hoe agriculture was practised in semi-arid parts of Punjab, Rajasthan and hilly tracks in North-Eastern and Central parts.

### Differences in rural society

- With the increase in production, differences arose among people engaged in agriculture.
- Buddhist tradition refers to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants and large landlords. The term gahapati was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. Landlords and heads of village were more powerful and had 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 uzhavar and slaves or adimai. It is likely that these differences were based on differential access to land, labour and some of the new technologies.
- Thus, differences in rural society were based on control over land, labour and technologies.

### Land grants and new rural elites

- Land grants by kings were recorded in inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions were on stone, but most were on copper plates which were probably given as a record of the transaction to those who received the land.

- Most of the records are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas.
- Most inscriptions were in Sanskrit. In some cases, and especially 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.
- Prabhavati Gupta, daughter of Chandragupta II, was married into the family of vakatakas in Deccan. According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have access to land. But Inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land.
- The inscription gives us an idea about rural people-Brahmanas, peasants and others who were expected to provide a range of produce to the king or his representatives.
- There were regional variations in the sizes of land donated.
- The impact of land grants is a subject of heated debate among historians. Some feel that land grants were part of a strategy adopted by ruling lineages to extend agriculture to new areas. Others suggest that land grants were indicative of weakening political power: as kings were losing control over their samantas, they tried to win allies by making grants of land.
- They also feel that kings tried to project themselves as supermen because they were losing control: they wanted to present at least a facade of power.
- Land grants provide some insight into the relationship between cultivators and the state
- However, groups who were often beyond the reach of officials or samantas such as pastoralists, fisher folk, hunter gatherers, sedentary artisans and shifting cultivators did not keep detailed records of their lives and transactions.

## 6. Towns and Trade

### New Cities

- From c. sixth century BCE, urban centres emerged in different parts of the subcontinent.
- Virtually 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.
  - ▶ Puhar, were near the coast from where sea routes began.
  - ▶ Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activity.

### Urban populations: Elites and craftspersons

- A wide range of artefacts have been recovered includes 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.
- Votive Inscriptions give us an idea about town people. In the towns different types of people used to live such as washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants and kings.
- Artisans and traders organized themselves in guilds or shrenis. Guilds procured raw materials, regulated production and marketed the finished product. It is likely that craftspersons used a range of iron tools to meet the growing demands of urban elites.

### Trade in the subcontinent and beyond

- Trade was not confined within the subcontinent but extended to East and North Africa and West Asia and to Southeast Asia and China.

- Those who traversed these routes included peddlers who probably travelled on foot and merchants who travelled with caravans of bullock carts and pack-animals. Also, there were seafarers, whose ventures were risky but highly profitable.
- Successful merchants, designated as masattuvan in Tamil and setthis and sathavahas in Prakrit, could become enormously rich.
- 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.

### Coins and kings

- Exchangers 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.
- Coins were issued by kings, merchants, bankers and town people.
- The first coins bearing 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 in first century CE by the Kushans. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued by contemporary Roman emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran. The widespread use of gold coins indicates the enormous value of the transactions that were taking place.
- Hoards of Roman coins have been found in south India. This indicates that there was a close connection between south India and Roman Empire.
- Coins were also issued by tribal republics. For e.g. Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (first century CE) issued thousands of copper coins.
- The Guptas also issued gold coins. These were remarkable for their purity. These coins facilitated long distance transactions.
- From sixth century onwards finds of gold coins are fewer. Historians divided on this issue. Some suggest that there was an economic crisis due to decline of long-distance trade following the collapse of Western Roman Empire and this affected the prosperity of the states, communities and regions that had benefited from it.
- Others argue that new towns and networks of trade began to emerge around this time though finds of coins are fewer coins continue to be mentioned in inscriptions and texts.

## 7. Back to Basics How Are Inscriptions Deciphered?

### Deciphering Brahmi

- It was only after James Prinsep, an officer in the mint of the English East India Company was able to decipher Ashokan Brahmi in 1838 they found early inscriptions are in Prakrit.

### How Kharosthi was read

- The story of the decipherment of Kharosthi, the script used in inscriptions in the northwest, is different. The coins of Indo –Greek kings contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. The European scholars compared the letters in both scripts. For e.g. the symbol for “a” could be found in both scripts for writing names such as Appollodotus



### Historical evidence from inscriptions

- It is found that the name Ashoka is not mentioned in inscriptions. Instead, the king is referred to as devanampiya (“beloved of the gods”) and piyadassi (“pleasant to behold”). There were a few inscriptions which also referred to the king as Asoka. These inscriptions are also containing such titles.
- By examining the content, style, language and paleography, of these inscriptions, epigraphists have come to the conclusion that they were issued by the same ruler.

### 8. The Limitations of Inscriptional Evidence

- Letters may be very faintly engraved
- Inscriptions may be damaged or letter missing
- It is not sure about the exact meaning of the words.
- Inscriptions may not have lasted the ravages of time. Thus, what is available at present is simply a fraction of what was written.
- Inscriptions may not provide a complete idea about political and economic history
- Inscriptions are written from the point of the view of the person who commissioned them.
- The routine agricultural practices may not be recorded in the inscriptions.

### KEY WORDS

1. **Janapada:** The land where a Jana (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles.
2. **Oligarchy:** A form of government where power is exercised by a group of men
3. **Girnar Inscription:** The inscription mentions the achievements of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman and Sudarsana Lake.
4. **The Manusmriti:** Legal texts of early India
5. **The Harshacharita:** A biography of Harshavardhana, the king of Kanauj composed by his court poet Banabatta.
6. **Agrahara land:** Land granted to a Brahmana. He was exempted from tax but had the right to collect tax dues from local people.
7. **Votive Inscriptions:** Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions.
8. **Periplus of the Erythrean Sea:** Periplus of the Erythrean Sea was composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (First century BCE).” Periplus” is a Greek word meaning sailing around and “Erythrean” was the Greek name for the Red Sea.
9. **Numismatics:** Study of coins including visual elements such as scripts and images, metallurgical analysis and the contexts in which they have been found.
10. **Transplantation** is used for paddy cultivation in areas where water is plentiful. Here, seeds are first broadcast; when the saplings have grown, they are transplanted in waterlogged fields. This ensures a higher ratio of survival of saplings and higher yields.

# 3

## Kinship, Caste and Class Early Societies (600BCE-6600CE)

- Historians often used textual traditions to understand
  - ▶ The extension of agriculture into forested area and how it transformed the lives of forest dweller;
  - ▶ How Craft specialists emerged as distinct social groups;
  - ▶ How the unequal distribution of wealth sharpened social differences
  - ▶ Norms of Social Behaviour and wide range of social situations and practices;

### 1. The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata

- The Mahabharata, a colossal epic running in its present form into over 100,00 verses with depictions of a wide range of social categories and situations.
- It was composed over a period of about 1,000 years (c. 500 BCE onwards), and some of the stories it contains may have been in circulating even earlier.
- The central story is about two sets of warring cousins. The text also contains sections laying down norms of behaviour for various social groups.
- It contains vivid descriptions of battles, forests, palaces and settlements.
- It describes a feud over land and power.
- These were the Kauravas and Pandavas who belonged to a single ruling family of the Kurus—a lineage dominating over one of the Janapadas.
- The conflict ended in a battle in which the pandavas emerge victorious. After that, patrilineal succession was proclaimed.

### 2. Kinship and Marriage Many Rules and varied Practices

#### Structure of families

- All the families are not identical; they vary in terms of numbers, relationship with each other, and the kinds of activities that they share.
- Often people belonging to the same family share food and other resources, and live, work and perform rituals together.
- Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as relatives, or to use a more technical term, **kinfolk**.
- Familial ties are based on blood and regarded as “natural”. They are defined in many ways such as in some societies cousins are regarded as relatives and in other societies they are not.
- In the case of early societies, it is easy for the historians to retrieve information about the families of elite class.
- On the other hand, it is very difficult to reconstruct the familial relationship of ordinary people.
- Another important factor is the attitude towards family and kinship as they give insight into people’s thinking.

### The ideal of Patriliney

- Patriliney had existed prior to the composition of the epic, the central story of the Mahabharata reinforced the idea that it was valuable.
- Under patriliney, sons could claim the resources (including the throne in the case of kings) of their fathers when the latter died.
- There were variations in practice: sometimes there were no sons, in some situations brothers succeeded one another, sometimes other kinsmen claimed the throne, and, in very exceptional circumstances, women exercised power.
- The concern with patriliney was not unique to ruling families. It is evident in mantras in ritual texts such as the Rigveda. It is possible that these attitudes were shared by wealthy men and those who claimed high status, including Brahmanas.

### Rules of Marriage

- While sons were important for the continuity of the patrilineage, daughters were viewed rather differently within this framework.
- They had no claims to the resources of the household. At the same time, marrying them into families outside the kin was considered desirable. This system, meant that the lives of young girls and women belonging to families that claimed high status were often carefully regulated to ensure that they were married at the “right” time and to the “right” person.
- This gave rise to the belief that kanyadana or the gift of a daughter in marriage was an important religious duty of the father.

### Types of marriages

- Endogamy: Endogamy refers to marriage inside ones own group. Here group stands for kin.
- Exogamy: Exogamy refers to the marriage outside ones own group or kin.
- Polygyny: Polygyny refers to the marriage in which a man has several wives.
- Polyandry: Polyandry refers to the practice in which a woman could have more than one husband.

### Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras

- These are codes of social behavior meant to be followed by Brahmanas in particular and society in general. They are written in Sanskrit.
- With the emergence of town people from near and far met to buy and sell their produce and shared their ideas in the urban milieu. This might have led to the questioning of earlier beliefs and practices. It was to meet this challenge that Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras were compiled.

### The Gotra of Women

- Gotra refers to the name given to a particular group of people on the name of a Vedic seer as their fore father so as to establish kinship between them.
- The system of gotra had significance to Brahmins.
- Each gotra was named after a Vedic seer, and all those who belonged to the same gotra were regarded as his descendants.
- Two rules about gotra were particularly important: women were expected to give up their father’s gotra and adopt that of their husband on marriage and members of the same gotra could not marry.
- When we examine the names of men and women which were sometimes derived from gotra names, we can find out that this was commonly followed.

- Some of the Satavahana rulers were polygynous (that is, had more than one wife). An examination of the names of women who married Satavahana rulers indicates that many of them had names derived from gotras such as Gotama and Vasistha, their father's gotras. They evidently retained these names instead of adopting names derived from their husband's gotra name as they were required to do according to the Brahmanical rules.
- Some of the women married to Satavahana rulers belonged to the same gotra.
- As is obvious, this ran counter to the ideal of exogamy recommended in the Brahmanical texts. In fact, it exemplified an alternative practice, that of endogamy or marriage within the kin group, which was prevalent amongst several communities in south India. Such marriages amongst kinfolk ensured a close-knit community.
- **Inscriptional evidence regarding the inheritance of gotra among Satavahana**
  - ▶ Satavahana rulers were identified through metonymics which suggest that mothers were given importance.
  - ▶ But their succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.
  - ▶ Several inscriptions of the Satavahana rulers mention the name of their mothers rather than their fathers.
  - ▶ For e.g, Gautamiputra Satakarni, son of Gautami.
- The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, one of the earliest Upanishads, contains a list of successive generations of teachers and students, many of whom were designated by metonymics.

### 3. Social Differences: Within and Beyond the Framework of Caste

- Caste refers to a set of hierarchically ordered social categories laid down in Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras.
- Brahmanas claimed that they placed themselves on the top and shudras at the bottom.
- The Brahmanas claimed that this order was divinely ordained.

#### The "right" occupation

- The Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras described the rules about the ideal occupations of the four categories or varnas.
  - ▶ Brahmanas were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, perform sacrifices and get sacrifices performed, give and receive gifts.
  - ▶ Kshatriyas were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed and make gifts.
  - ▶ The Vaishyas were expected to give gifts, get sacrifices performed and study Vedas in addition to engaging agriculture, pastoralism and trade.
  - ▶ Shudras were assigned the job of serving the three 'higher' varnas.
- The Brahmanas evolved two or three strategies for enforcing these norms.
  1. To assert that the varna order was of divine origin.
  2. They advised kings to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms.
  3. They attempted to persuade people that their status was determined by birth.

#### Non-Kshatriya kings

- According to the Shastras, only Kshatriyas were supposed to be the kings.
- But it is observed that any person who is able to muster support and resources and need not to depend on theory of birth.

- For example, there are different opinions regarding the origin of the Mauryas. Later Buddhist texts suggest that they were Kshatriyas while the Brahmanical texts describe them as the rulers of 'low' origin.
- The immediate successors of Mauryas were Shungas and Kanvas who were Brahmins.
- In fact, political power was effectively open to anyone who could muster support and resources, and rarely depended on birth as a Kshatriya.
- Other rulers, such as the Shakas who came from Central Asia, were regarded as mlechchhas, barbarians or outsiders by the Brahmanas. However, one of the earliest inscriptions in Sanskrit describes how Rudradaman, the best-known Shaka ruler (c. second century CE), rebuilt Sudarshana lake. This suggests that powerful mlechchhas were familiar with Sanskrit traditions
- The Satavahana King Gautamiputra Satakarni claimed to be Brahmin and destroyer of Kshatriya's pride. He also claimed to have ensured that there was no intermarriage amongst members of the four varnas, but he himself entered into marriage alliance with the kin of Rudradaman. Besides, Brahmanical texts prescribed exogamy, but the Satavahanas practiced endogamy.
- From these examples, we can assume that integration within the framework caste was often a complicated process.

#### **Jatis and social mobility**

- In Brahmanical theory, jati, like varna, was based on birth.
- However, while the number of varnas was fixed at four, there was no restriction on the number of jatis.
- In fact, whenever Brahmanical authorities encountered new groups – for instance, people living in forests such as the nishadas – or wanted to assign a name to occupational categories such as the goldsmith or suvarnakara, which did not easily fit into the fourfold varna system, they classified them as a jati.
- Jatis which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organised into shrenis or guilds.
- Mandasor Inscription:
  - ▶ One interesting stone inscription (c. fifth century CE), found in Mandasor (Madhya Pradesh), records the history of a guild of silk weavers who originally lived in Lata (Gujarat), from where they migrated to Mandasor, then known as Dashapura. It states that they undertook the difficult journey along with their children and kinfolk, as they had heard about the greatness of the local king, and wanted to settle in his kingdom.
  - ▶ The inscription provides a fascinating glimpse of complex social processes and provides insights into the nature of guilds or shrenis. Although membership was based on a shared craft specialisation, some members adopted other occupations. It also indicates that the members shared more than a common profession – they collectively decided to invest their wealth, earned through their craft, to construct a splendid temple in honour of the sun god.

#### **Beyond the four varnas: Integration**

- There were populations whose social practices were not influenced Brahmanical ideas such as forest-dwellers Nishadas, nomadic pastoralists etc. Sometimes those who spoke non-Sanskritic languages were labelled as mlechchhas and looked down upon. There was a sharing of ideas and beliefs between these people.

#### **Beyond the four varnas Subordination and conflict**

- Untouchables and duties prescribed for them in Manusmriti and Shastra.
- The Brahmanas considered some social categories as "untouchable".

- This rested on a notion that certain activities, especially those connected with the performance of rituals, were sacred and by extension “pure”. Those who considered themselves pure avoided taking food from those they designated as “untouchable”.
- Some activities were regarded as “polluting”. These included handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks were known as chandalas and were placed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Touching and seeing them was regarded as “polluting” by the Brahmanas.
- The Manusmriti laid down the duties of the chandalas. They had to live outside the village; use discarded utensils, and wear clothes of the dead and ornaments of iron. They could not walk an out in villages and cities at night. They had to dispose of the bodies of those who had no relatives and serve as executioners.
- **Observations made by Fa Xian and Xuan Zang**
  - ▶ The Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian (c. fifth century CE) wrote that “untouchables” had to sound a clapper in the streets so that people could avoid seeing them.
  - ▶ Another Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang (c. seventh century), observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city.
- By examining non-Brahmanical texts which depict the lives of chandalas, historians have tried to find out whether chandalas accepted the life of degradation prescribed in the Shastras. Sometimes, these depictions correspond with those in the Brahmanical texts. But occasionally, there are hints of different social realities.

#### 4. Beyond Birth Resources and Status

- Slaves, landless agricultural labourers, hunters, fisherfolk, pastoralists, peasants, village headmen, craftspersons, merchants and kings emerged as social actors in different parts of the subcontinent. Their social positions were often shaped by their access to economic resources
- The criteria on which property is granted
  - ▶ On the basis of Gender
  - ▶ On the basis of Varna

#### Gendered access to property

- The access to resources sharpened the social differences between men and women.
- According to Manusmriti, the paternal estate was to be divided equally amongst sons after the death of the parents, with a special share for the eldest. Women could not claim a share of these resources.
- However, women were allowed to retain the gifts they received on the occasion of their marriage as stridhana (literally, a woman’s wealth). This could be inherited by their children, without the husband having any claim on it.
- At the same time, the Manusmriti warned women against hoarding family property, or even their own valuables, without the husband’s permission
- Both epigraphic and textual evidences suggest that while upper class women may have had access to resources, land, cattle and money were generally controlled by men

#### Varna and access to property

- According to the Brahmanical texts, another criterion (apart from gender) for regulating access to wealth was varna.
- The only “occupation” prescribed for Shudras was servitude, while a variety of occupations were listed for men of the first three varnas.

- If these provisions were actually implemented, the wealthiest men would have been the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. That this corresponded to some extent with social realities is evident from descriptions of priests and kings in other textual traditions. Kings are almost invariably depicted as wealthy; priests are also generally shown to be rich, though there are occasional depictions of the poor Brahmana.
- Other traditions also developed critiques of the varna order. Some of the best-known of these were developed within early Buddhism (c. sixth century BCE onwards). The Buddhists recognised that there were differences in society, but did not regard these as natural or inflexible. They also rejected the idea of claims to status on the basis of birth.

#### **An alternative social scenario: Sharing wealth**

- There were other situations where men who were generous were respected, while those who were miserly or simply accumulated wealth for themselves were despised.
- One area where these values were cherished was ancient Tamilakam, where there were several chiefdoms around 2,000 years ago. Amongst other things, the chiefs were patrons of bards and poets who sang their praise. Poems included in the Tamil Sangam anthologies often illuminate social and economic relationships, suggesting that while there were differences between rich and poor, those who controlled resources were also expected to share them.

#### **5. Explaining Social Differences: A Social Contract**

- The Tamil Sangam anthologies illustrate economic, social relationships, suggesting that while there were differences between rich and poor, those who controlled resources were expected to share them.
- The Buddhists also developed an alternative understanding of social inequalities, and of the institutions required to regulate social conflict.
- In a myth found in a text known as the Sutta Pitaka they suggested that originally human beings did not have fully evolved bodily forms, nor was the world of plants fully developed. All beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, taking from nature only what they needed for each meal
- Explaining Social Differences- A Social Contract. The myth found in Sutta Pitaka suggests:
  - ▶ The institution of kingship was based on human choice, with taxes as form of payment for services rendered by the king
  - ▶ At the same time, it reveals recognition of human agency in creating and institutionalizing economic and social relations.
  - ▶ It also recognizes the fact that since human beings are responsible for creation of the system, they could also change it in future.
  - ▶ The king was elected by the whole people (mahasammata).

#### **6. Handling Texts: Historians and the Mahabharata**

- The elements of consideration for historian while analyzing texts are follows:
  1. They examine whether texts were written in Prakrit, Pali or Tamil, languages that were probably used by ordinary people, or in Sanskrit, a language meant almost exclusively for priests and elites.
  2. Kind of text-whether it was a mantra or story.
  3. Author's perspective in writing the text
  4. The audience to whom it was written
  5. Date of the composition or compilation of the text.
  6. The place of composition.

### Language and content

We have been considering the Sanskrit language Mahabharata.

- The Sanskrit used in the Mahabharata is simpler than that of the Vedas or of the prashastis. So, it was probably better to be understood.
- The contents of the text present are classified under two broad heads:
  - ▶ One that contains stories, designated as the 'narrative'
  - ▶ Other section, containing prescriptions about social norms, known as 'didactic'. This section includes stories and narratives containing social messages.
- However, generally historians agree that the Mahabharata was meant to be a dramatic, moving story, and that the didactic portions were probably added later.

### Author(s) and dates

- The author of Mahabharata is unknown.
- The original story was composed by chariot-bards known as **sutas** who generally accompanied the Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and composed poems celebrating their victories and achievements.
- These compositions were circulated orally. Then, from the fifth century BCE, Brahmanas took over the story and began to commit it to writing.
- It is also possible that the upheavals that often accompanied the establishment of these states, where old social values were often replaced by new norms, are reflected in some parts of the story.
- Another phase is c.200BCE and 200BCE when worship of Vishnu was growing and Krishna was being identified with Vishnu.
- Between c.200 and 400CE didactic sections resembling the Manusmriti were added.
- All these additions made the text, which started with less than 10,000 verses to 100,000 verses. This work is traditionally attributed to sage Veda Vyasa.

### The search for convergence

- **Excavation of Hastinapura**
  - ▶ Excavations at Hastinapura (Meerut, U.P) were conducted in 1951-52 by B.B Lal of Archaeological Survey of India and he found evidence of five occupational levels.
    1. Houses of this period were built of mud brick as well as burnt bricks.
    2. Soakage jars and brick drains were used for draining out refuse water.
    3. Terracotta ring wells have been used both as wells and drainage pits.
- **Polyandry marriage in Mahabharata**
  - ▶ Draupadi's marriage with Pandavas was an example of polyandry marriage.
  - ▶ The polyandry marriage in Mahabharata suggests different things. It may be because of the shortage of women due to incessant wars or due to situational crisis and also that narratives sometimes does not reflect the social realities.

### Mahabharata: A Dynamic Text

- Mahabharata was written in a variety of languages.
- Those people who wrote versions of the epic added stories originated or circulated in their localities.
- The central story of the epic was often retold in many ways. Episodes were depicted in sculpture and painting



- They also provided themes for a wide range of performing arts-plays, dance and other kinds of narrations.

**KEY WORDS**

1. **Kula:** Sanskrit texts use the term kula to designate families
2. **Kin:** A group of people having a common lineage.
3. **Patriliney:** Patriliney is referred to the tracing of lineage from the paternal side
4. **Matriliney:** Matriliney is referred to the tracing of lineage from the maternal side.
5. **Metronymics:** The system of deriving names from mother is known as Metronymics. The Satavahana rulers were identified through metronymics. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishads, one of the earliest Upanishads contains a list of successive generations of teachers and students, many of whom were designated by metronymics
6. **Purusha sukta:** Purusha sukta of Rigveda mentions about the division of society in to four varnas. The four varnas were said to have emanated from the body of Purusha, the primeval man. Brahmanas from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and the Shudras from the feet.

# 4

## Beliefs and Buildings Cultural Developments (c.600 BCE- 600 CE)

- This chapter discusses the major religious developments in early India focusing on Buddhism.
- It also examines how these religious ideas were compiled as texts and reflected in architecture and sculpture.
- **The sources** that historians use to reconstruct this exciting world of ideas and beliefs include Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical texts, as well as a large and impressive body of material remains including monuments and inscriptions.
- Among the best-preserved monuments of the time is the stupa at Sanchi which is a major focus in this chapter.

### 1. A Glimpse of Sanchi

- Nineteenth-century Europeans were very interested in the stupa at Sanchi.
- The French and British wanted to take away the eastern gateway, which was the best preserved, to be displayed in a museum but fortunately both the French and the English were satisfied with carefully prepared plaster-cast copies and the original remained at the site, part of the Bhopal state.
- The rulers of Bhopal, Shahjehan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, provided money for the preservation of the ancient site.
- One of the most important Buddhist centers, the discovery of Sanchi has vastly transformed our understanding of early Buddhism. Today it stands testimony to the successful restoration and preservation of a key archaeological site by the Archaeological Survey of India.

### 2. The Background: Sacrifices and Debates

- It was during this period that thinkers such as Zarathustra in Iran, Kong Zi in china, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India emerged.
- They tried to understand the mysteries of existence and relationship between the humans and cosmic order.
- In India this was also the time when cities and kingdoms were developing and social and economic life was changing in a variety of ways in Ganga valley.
- These thinkers of India attempted to understand these developments as well.

#### The Sacrificial Tradition

- The Rig Veda was compiled between c.1500 and 100 BCE and consists of hymns in praise of a variety of deities, especially Agni, Indra and Soma.
- These hymns were chanted when the sacrifices were performed and people prayed for cattle, sons, good health, long life and other things.
- The Sacrifices earlier were performed collectively. Later (c.100BCE-500 BCE onwards) some were performed by the heads of households for well-being of the domestic unit.
- More elaborate sacrifices, such as the rajasuya and asvamedha were performed by chiefs and kings who depended on Brahmana priests to conduct the rituals.

### New Questions

- Many ideas found in the Upanishads (c. sixth century BCE onwards) show that people were curious about the meaning of life, the possibility of life after death, and rebirth.
- And others, outside the Vedic tradition asked whether there was even a single ultimate reality. People also began speculating on the significance of the sacrificial tradition.

### Debates and Discussions

- Lively discussions and debates from Buddhist texts, which mention as many as 64 sects or schools of thought.
- **Kutagarashala** were the places where the debates of teachers, who tried to convince one another and laypersons about the validity of their philosophy, took place.
- **Kutagarashala literally means hut with a pointed roof or in groves where travelling mendicants halted.**
- If a philosopher succeeded in convincing one of his rivals, the followers of the latter also became his disciples. So, support for any particular sect could grow and shrink over time
- Many of the teachers, including Mahavira and Buddha questioned the authority of the Vedas.
- They emphasized on individual agency. They suggested men and women could strive to attain liberation from trials and tribulations of worldly existence.
- This differed from the Brahmanical position as they believed that individual's existence was determined by his or her birth in specific caste or gender.

### 3. Beyond Worldly Pleasure- The message of Mahavira (Basic ideas of Jaina Philosophy)

- The basic philosophy of the Jainas was already in existence in north India before the birth of Vardhamana, who came to be known as Mahavira, in the sixth century BCE.
- According to Jaina tradition, Mahavira was preceded by 23 thirthankaras.
- The thirthankaras are teachers who guide men and women across the river of existence.
- The main teachings of Mahavira are:
  1. The entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life.
  2. No-injury to living beings, especially to humans, animals, plants and insects.
  3. The principle of ahimsa, emphasized within Jainism
  4. The cycle of birth and rebirth is shaped through karma.
  5. Asceticism and penance are required to free oneself from the cycle of karma. This can be achieved only by renouncing the world; therefore, monastic existence is a necessary condition of salvation.
- Jaina monks and nuns took five vows:
  - ▶ To abstain from killing
  - ▶ To abstain from stealing
  - ▶ To abstain from lying
  - ▶ To observe celibacy
  - ▶ To abstain from possessing property.

### The Spread of Jainism

- The teachings of Mahavira were recorded by his disciples.
- These were in the form of stories which could appeal to ordinary people.
- Jaina scholars produced a wealth of literature in a variety of languages such as Prakrit, Sanskrit and Tamil and preserved in libraries attached to temples.

- Gradually, Jainism spread to many parts of India
- Many stone sculptures connected with the Jain traditions have been recovered from several sites.

#### 4. The Buddha and the Quest for Enlightenment

- One of the most influential teachers of the time was the Buddha.
- Over the centuries, his message spread across the subcontinent and beyond – through Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka, across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia
- The traumatic incidents that changed the life of the Buddha:
  - ▶ Buddha was named Siddhartha at birth and was the son of the chief of **Sakya clan**.
  - ▶ He led a sheltered upbringing in the palace detached from the harsh realities of life.
  - ▶ He undertook a journey into a city which was a turning point in his life.
  - ▶ He was deeply anguished when he saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse.
  - ▶ It was at the moment that he realized that decay of human body was inevitable.
  - ▶ He saw a mendicant who had come to terms with old age and disease and death and found peace.
  - ▶ Soon after, Siddhartha left the palace in search of truth.
  - ▶ He explored many paths including bodily mortification.
  - ▶ He abandoned the extreme path and meditated for several days and **finally attained enlightenment and came to be known as Buddha or the enlightened one**. For the rest of his life he taught **dhamma or the path of righteous living**.

#### 5. The Teachings of the Buddha

- **Sources:** Sutta Pitaka contains the teachings of Buddha in the form of stories. Few stories describe his miraculous powers and others suggest that Buddha tried to convince people through reasons and persuasion rather through displays of supernatural power.
- The world is **transient (anicca)** and constantly changing.
- It is also **soulless (anatta)** as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it.
- Within this transient world, **sorrow (dukkha)** is intrinsic to human existence.
- It is by following the middle path between severe penance and self-indulgence that human beings can rise above these worldly troubles.
- In the early forms of Buddhism whether or not God existed was irrelevant.
- The Buddha emphasized individual agency and righteous action as the means to escape from the cycle of rebirth and attain self-realization and **nibbana, literally the extinguishing of the ego and desire** - and thus end the cycle of suffering for those who renounced the world. Buddhism emphasizes literally the extinguishing of the ego and desires and thus ends the suffering of those who renounced the world.
- According to Buddhist tradition, his last words to his followers were: “Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation.”

#### 6. Followers of the Buddha

- Buddha founded a sangha. The body of disciples of the Buddha or an organization of monks is called **sangha**.
- It was an organization of monks who became teachers of dhamma.
- These monks lead a simple life possessing only the essential requisites for survival, such as a bowl to receive food once a day from the laity.
- As they lived on alms, they were known as **bhikkus**.

- Initially, only men were allowed into the sangha, but later women also came to be admitted. The Buddha's foster mother, **Mahaprajapati Gotami was the first woman to be included as bhikkuni.**
- Many women who entered the sangha became teachers of dhamma and went on to become their, or respected women who had attained liberation.
- The Buddha's followers came from many social groups. They included kings, wealthy men and gahapatis, and also humbler folk; workers, slaves and crafts people.
- Once within the sangha, all were regarded as equal, having shed their earlier social identities on becoming bhikkus and bhikkunis.
- The Buddhist sangha which comprised of bhikkus and bhikkunis functioned on the lines of ganas and sanghas where consensus was arrived at based on discussions. If discussions failed to bring about harmony then decisions were taken by a vote on that subject.
- **Spread of Buddhism**
  - ▶ Buddhism grew rapidly both during the lifetime of the Buddha and after his death.
  - ▶ People were dissatisfied with the prevailing religions and were confused by the rapid social changes that were taking place around them.
  - ▶ The importance attached to conduct and values rather than claims of superiority based on birth, the emphasis placed on metta (fellow feeling) and karuna (compassion), especially for those who were younger and weaker than oneself, were ideas that drew men and women to Buddhist teachings.

## 7. Stupas

- The Buddhist ideas and practices emerged out of a process of dialogue with other traditions – including those of the Brahmanas, Jainas and several others not all of whose ideas and practices were preserved in texts.
- From earliest times, people tended to regard certain places as sacred. These included sites with special trees or unique rocks, or sites of awe-inspiring natural beauty. These sites, with small shrines attached to them, were sometimes described as chaityas.
- Buddhist literature mentions several chaityas. It also describes places associated with the Buddha's life
  - ▶ Lumbini- where he was born
  - ▶ Bodh Gaya -where he attained enlightenment
  - ▶ Saranath -where he gave his first sermon and
  - ▶ Kushinagara-. Where he attained nibbana
- These four places were considered as sacred.

### Why were stupas built

- There were other places too that were regarded as sacred. This was because relics of the Buddha such as his bodily remains or objects used by him were buried there. These were mounds known as stupas.
- The tradition of erecting stupas may have been pre-Buddhist, but they came to be associated with Buddhism. Since they contained relics regarded as sacred, the entire stupa came to be venerated as an emblem of both the Buddha and Buddhism.
- According to a Buddhist text known as the Ashokavadana, Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them. By the second century BCE a number of stupas, including those at Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath, had been built.

### How were stupas built

- Inscriptions found on the railings and pillars of stupas record donations made for building and decorating them.
- Some donations were made by kings such as the Satavahanas; others were made by guilds, such as that of the ivory workers who financed part of one of the gateways at Sanchi.
- Hundreds of donations were made by women and men who mention their names, sometimes adding the name of the place from where they came, as well as their occupations and names of their relatives.
- Bhikkhus and bhikkhunis also contributed towards building these monuments

### The structure of the Stupa

- Stupa is a Sanskrit word meaning a heap. The structure of stupa originated as a simple circular mound of earth called **anda**. Gradually, it developed into a more complex structure.
- Above the anda was the **harmika**, a balcony like structure that represented the abode of the gods. Arising from the harmika was the mast called the **yashti** surrounded by a **chhatra** or an **umbrella**.
- Around the mound was a railing, separating the sacred space from the secular world.

#### ■ The early Stupas

- ▶ The early stupas were built at Sanchi and Burhat
- ▶ They were plain except for the stone railings, which resembled a bamboo or wooden fence and the gateways, which were richly carved and installed at the four cardinal points.
- ▶ The Mound of the stupas at Amravati and Shah-ji-Dheri in Peshawar came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures compared to the early stupas at Sanchi and Barhut.

### 8. 'Discovering' Stupas – The Fate of Amaravati and Sanchi

- The Mahachaitya at Amaravati is now just an insignificant little mound, totally denuded of its former glory. The following factors were responsible for the present fate of Amaravati.
  - ▶ In 1796, a local raja stumbled upon the ruins of the stupas at Amravati using its stone to build a temple.
  - ▶ In 1854, Walter Elliot, the commissioner of Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), visited Amravati and collected several sculpture panels and took them away to Madras.
  - ▶ Colonel Colin Mackenzie also visited the site but his reports were not published.
  - ▶ By the 1850s, some of the slabs from Amravati had begun to be taken to different places: to the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, to the India Office in Madras and some even to London.
  - ▶ Many of these sculptures were seen adorning the garden of British administrators.
- View of H.H. COLE, on the preservation of ancient monuments
  - ▶ He wrote: "It seems to me a suicidal and indefensible policy to allow the country to be looted of original works of ancient art."
  - ▶ He believed that museums should have plaster-cast facsimiles of sculpture, whereas the originals should remain where they had been found.
  - ▶ Unfortunately, Cole did not succeed in convincing the authorities about Amaravati, although his plea for in situ (in the original place) preservation was adopted in the case of Sanchi.
  - ▶ The role of the Begums of Bhopal in preserving the stupa at Sanchi
  - ▶ Among the best-preserved monuments of the time is the stupa at Sanchi. In the 19th century, Europeans, first the French and later the English were interested to take away the eastern gateway of the stupa to Paris and London museums.

- ▶ Shahjehan Begum of Bhopal took a wise decision to make plaster cast copies to please Europeans. This resulted in the original remain at the state.
- ▶ The rulers of Bhopal, Shahjehan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, provided money for the preservation of the ancient site.
- ▶ Museum was built; publication of the volumes by John Marshall was funded.
- ▶ The Sanchi stupa as the most important Buddhist centre has helped in the understanding of early Buddhism.
- ▶ Today it stands testimony to the successful restoration of a key archaeological site by the Archaeological Survey of India.

## 9. Sculpture

### Stories in Stone

- The sculptures at Sanchi are scrolls of stories which depict scenes from Jatakas.
- There were stories of Vessantara Jataka where the prince gives up everything to the Brahmana and goes to live in forest with his wife and children.

### Symbols of Worship

- The early sculpture does not have the image of Buddha.
- Instead it uses symbols like an empty seat represents meditation of the Buddha and stupa represented the mahaparinibbana.
- There was the use of wheel which stood for the first sermon delivered by Buddha at Saranath.
- As it is obvious, such sculptures cannot be understood literally.
- For example, the image of a tree does not stand simply for a tree, but symbolizes an event in the life of the Buddha.
- Hence historians have to familiarize themselves with the traditions of those who produced these works of art to understand such symbols.

### Popular Traditions

- Some other sculptures at Sanchi were not directly inspired by Buddhist ideas.
- These include beautiful women known as shalabhanjika swinging from the edge of the gateway, holding onto a tree.
- According to popular belief, the mere touching of the tree by her would make the tree to flower and bear fruit.
- Many people who turned to Buddhism enriched it with their own pre-Buddhist and even non- Buddhist beliefs, practices and ideas.
- Many animals were also carved to create lively scenes to attract viewers.
- For example, elephant was carved which signified strength and wisdom.
- Another figure found at Sanchi stupa is that of Maya the mother of Buddha or popular goddess Gajalakshmi.
- The motif of a serpent was found at Sanchi. James Fergusson, a modern art historian considered Sanchi as the centre of tree and serpent worship.

## 10. New Religion Traditions

### The Development of Mahayana Buddhism

- By the first century CE, there is evidence of changes in Buddhist ideas and practices.
- Early Buddhist teachings had given great importance to self-effort in achieving nibbana.
- Buddha was regarded as a human being who attained enlightenment and nibbana through his own efforts.
- The idea of Buddha as a saviour emerged. It was believed that he is the one who could ensure salvation.
- Simultaneously, the concept of the Bodhisatta also developed. Bodhisattas were perceived as deeply compassionate beings that could help others to attain nibbana.
- The worship of the images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas became an important part of this tradition.
- This new way of thinking was called Mahayana-literally; the “greater vehicle”.
- The followers of Mahayana Buddhism described the older tradition as Hinayana or the “lesser vehicle”.

### The growth of Puranic Hinduism

- There were two important traditions that developed within puranic Hinduism.
  1. Vaishnavism is a form of Hinduism within which Vishnu was worshipped as the principal deity. In the case of Vaishnavism; cults were developed around the various avatars or incarnations of Lord Vishnu. According to Vaishnavism there are ten avatars of Vishnu.
    - ▶ Avatars were forms that the deity was believed to have assumed in order to save the world whenever the world was threatened by evil forces.
    - ▶ Different avatars were popular in different parts of the country.
  2. Shaivism is a tradition within which Shiva was regarded as the chief god. Shiva was symbolized by the linga, although he was occasionally represented in the form of human figure too.
    - ▶ Some of these deities were represented in sculptures. All such representations depicted a complex set of ideas about the deities.
    - ▶ To understand the meaning of these sculptures historians have to be familiar with the Puranas.
    - ▶ Puranas contained stories about gods and goddesses. They were written in simple Sanskrit and were meant to be read aloud to everybody.
    - ▶ Puranas evolved through interaction amongst people-priests, merchants, and ordinary men and women who travelled from place to place sharing ideas and beliefs.
    - ▶ For example, Vasudeva-Krishna was an important deity in the Mathura region.
    - ▶ Over centuries, his worship spread to other parts of the country as well.

### Building Temples

- When the stupas at sites such as Sanchi were taking their present form, at the same time the first temples to house images of gods and goddesses were also being built.
- The early temple was a small square room, called the garbhagriha, with a single doorway for the worshipper to enter and offer worship to the image.
- Gradually, a tall structure, known as sikhara, was built over the central shrine.
- Temple walls were often decorated with sculpture.
- Assembly halls, huge walls, gateways and arrangements for supplying water made the later temples far more elaborate.



- One of the unique features of early temples was that some of these were hollowed out of huge rocks, as artificial caves.
- An amazing example of the carving out of an entire temple from a cave is that of Kailasnatha temple at Ellora (Maharashtra).

### **11. Problems faced by the European scholars while studying the sculptures.**

- Firstly, the European scholars were not familiar with the local traditions and beliefs. They were horrified by the images of half human and half animals. They considered the Indian sculptures inferior to that of European sculptures from Greece with which they were familiar. This was because they compared the Indian sculpture to the images of Greece with which they were familiar.
- Secondly, the art historians used textual traditions to understand the meaning of sculptures. While this is a better strategy than comparing the images found in India with that of Greece but it was not always easy to use. For example, to identify the sculpture along a huge rock in Mahabalipuram, art historians have to search through the Puranas.

### **KEY WORDS**

1. **Hagiography:** Hagiography is a biography of a saint or religious leader.
2. **Thervadins:** The followers of the older tradition of Buddhism.
3. **Tripitaka:** Literally Tripitaka means 'Three Baskets'. These were Buddhist texts namely Sutta Pitaka, Vinayapitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka.
4. **Chaitya:** Chaitya may also have been derived from the word chaitya, meaning a funeral pyre, and by extension a funerary mound.