The Gupta Empire

Class 7th NCERT

Chapter 7

CHAPTER 7

The Gupta Era: An Age of Tireless Creativity

> *Neither force nor mere diplomacy can eliminate evil; nor is righteousness upheld by flattery alone. It is wisdom and knowledge that truly strengthen a kingdom — not indulgence in luxuries.*
>
> *— Kālidāsa in Raghuvanśham*

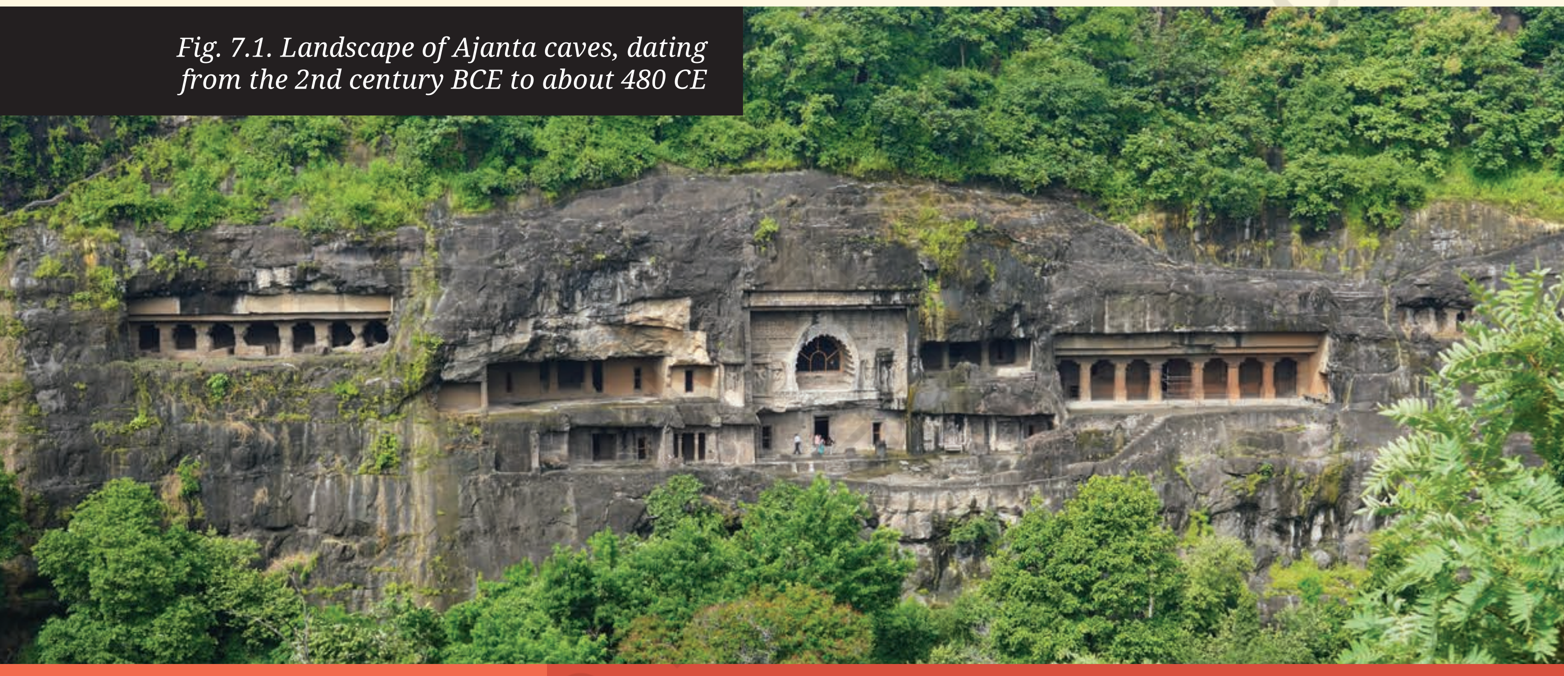

Fig. 7.1. Landscape of Ajanta caves, dating from the 2nd century BCE to about 480 CE

The Big Questions?

1. *Who were the Guptas? Why is the Gupta period sometimes called the 'classical age' in Indian history?*
2. *What was happening in the rest of the subcontinent at this time?*
3. *Who were some great figures of this period, and why do their stories matter today?*

not to

Dhruv and Bhavisha had just returned from their journey to the Pāṇḍya kingdom. They had seen the splendid markets, taken a short trip on a ship, and met some Roman traders buying pearls. Now they were itching to use Itihāsa again and jump a few centuries. "What would that be like?" they wondered. "Will the cities be the same? What about the people and society — would they have changed? What kind of governance would they have? Would there be new literature, new art?" They could not wait to find out and were soon whisked away to ...

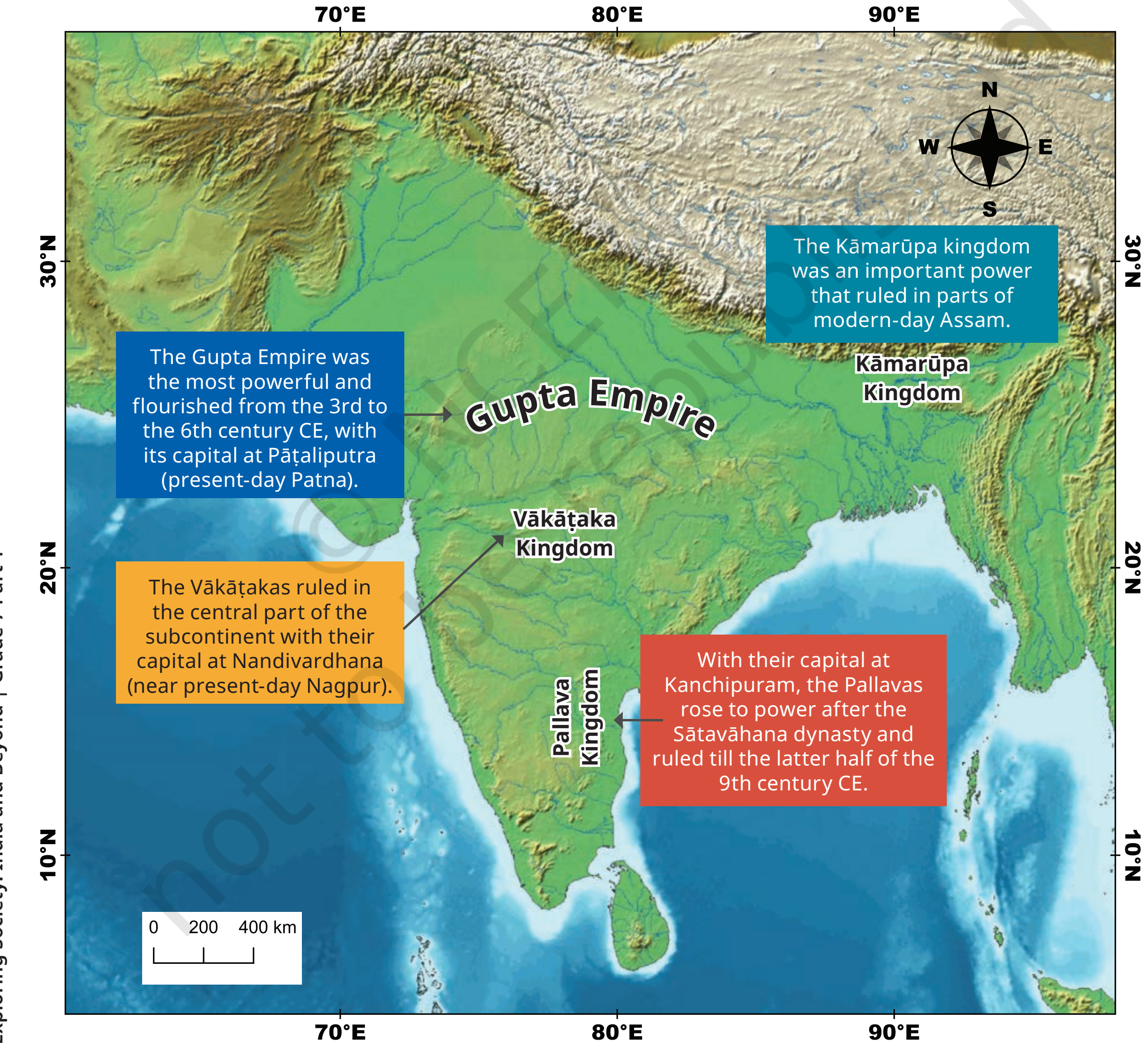

Fig. 7.2. Empires and kingdoms during the period from 3rd to 6th century CE.

Bhavisha: *My head is spinning. There are so many kingdoms and empires. How am I ever going to remember all of this?*

Dhruv: *Do not worry, Bhavisha! Let us understand what is happening, and we'll remember it.*

Bhavisha: *Is there anything in this period that we can see back home?*

Dhruv: *Let us use our time machine and find out!*

Bhavisha activates 'Itihāsa', and they jump to Mehrauli (in Delhi), where the famous Iron Pillar of Delhi stands.

They overhear a tour guide nearby, who was explaining the significance of this pillar.

Fig. 7.3. Iron Pillar, Mehrauli, Delhi

Tour Guide: This **Iron Pillar** of Delhi is over 1,600 years old and still stands tall without rusting. It is a testament to the advanced metallurgical skills of ancient India.

Bhavisha: *1,600 years old and not rusting! Let us go and see it.*

Bhavisha: *Look! Is this the famous 'iron pillar'?*

Dhruv: *Oh wow! There is something written on it, but I cannot read it.*

Bhavisha: *I wonder who made this? And why? Let's hear what the guide uncle has to say about this.*

Tour Guide: *The 6-tonne pillar was erected during the reign of Chandragupta II, a ruler of the Gupta dynasty. It was probably erected first in front of the Udayagiri caves (Madhya Pradesh) and brought to Delhi a few centuries later. It was dedicated to Viṣhṇu, and its inscriptions celebrate the king's achievements.*

Both: *That is so fascinating! We would love to learn more about this king and his empire.*

Let us begin this exciting journey into the history of the Gupta Empire!

DON'T MISS OUT

Picture leaving a bicycle out in the rain for just one year—it would soon show signs of rust. Yet this ancient pillar, standing under the open sky for centuries, remains unaltered. Scientists have tried to uncover its secret, and they believe it is because a unique thin layer, created by the special iron used and oxygen from the air, forms on the surface of the iron, protecting it from corrosion.

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A New Power Emerges

By the 3rd century CE, the Kuṣhāṇa Empire, which spread over the north and northwest of the Subcontinent, started to weaken. New kingdoms emerged, setting the stage for a fresh period of consolidation, and the new actor on this stage was the Gupta dynasty.

There are various theories on the origin of the Guptas. However, it is widely believed that they emerged in a region near present-day Uttar Pradesh as regional rulers. Over time, they rose to prominence and established a powerful empire. The Gupta period is considered remarkable in Indian history and is marked by significant developments in many areas. The fields of art, architecture, literature and science flourished, particularly during the time of Chandragupta II, and that legacy continues even today.

The inscription on the iron pillar in Delhi speaks of a king named 'Chandra', who has been identified with Chandragupta II (not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya from the Maurya dynasty, whom we met earlier). Chandragupta II, also known as 'Vikramāditya', was one of the renowned rulers of the Gupta dynasty. He was a devotee of Viṣhṇu and his mount *(vāhana)* Garuḍa often appears on many inscriptions.

DON'T MISS OUT

Have you noticed the 'II' in Chandragupta II's name? Historians added this number because there was another **'Chandragupta'** before him — his grandfather! (This tradition of naming the first son after his grandfather is followed by some Indian families even today.) Chandragupta I, as he is referred to, played a crucial role in the early expansion of the Gupta Empire; he is remembered for his coins and strategic alliances, which helped him consolidate his power and lay the foundation for a strong empire.

Fig. 7.4. Gold coin featuring King Chandragupta I with his queen, Kumāradevī; on the reverse side, a seated goddess identified as Lakṣhmī

The warrior king

The *prayāga praśhasti,* a pillar inscription in Prayagraj, praises the achievements of Samudragupta, Chandragupta II's father. According to the author of the inscription — the court poet Harisena — the king's ambition was to be *'dharaṇi-bandha'* or to 'unify the Earth'. To this end, he fought many wars, defeating

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Fig. 7.5. An inscription by Harisena

kings, taking over their kingdoms and expanding his empire. Many defeated kings were reinstated and offered tribute to Samudragupta, while others, fearing his might, submitted without protest.

Harisena also wrote about how the king supported art, learning and trade, making his kingdom rich and successful. Samudragupta himself is portrayed as a veena player in one of the coins he minted (Fig. 7.6).

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think kings chose to proclaim their achievements in the form of inscriptions?

Fig. 7.6. A seated Samudragupta, playing the veena; on the reverse side, goddess Lakṣhmī

LET'S REMEMBER

Ambitious kings sometimes performed the *aśhvamedha yajña* to build mighty empires and leave a legacy for the future. Such a significant event was commemorated by minting special coins like the one shown in Fig 7.7.

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Fig. 7.7. This coin depicts the sacrificial horse of the aśhvamedha yajña; the reverse depicts the queen holding a chauri (fly whisk).

Some literary sources give us descriptive information about rulers, kingdoms and the people. The *Viṣhṇu Purāṇa,* for instance, specifies the key regions of the empire: "The Gupta dynasty will rule over Anugaṅga (the middle-Gangetic basin), Prayāga (present-day Prayagraj), Sāketa (Ayodhya), and Magadha (approximately Bihar) and all the surrounding regions." But at its peak, the Gupta Empire covered a larger area than this — most of present-day north and west India, along with parts of central and east India.

LET'S EXPLORE

In the Grade 6 chapter 'Timeline and Sources of History', we listed multiple sources that help us understand the past. Compile a list of the sources we have referred to so far in the chapter. What did we learn from each source?

Imagine what it would have entailed to move a whole army of soldiers, elephants, horses, cooks, and other support staff, as well as the supplies to feed them all. Clearly, the tributary kings must have been asked to provide for these.

LET'S EXPLORE

Take a political map of India and locate the present-day states and Union territories where the Guptas ruled (see Fig. 7.8). Mark these states on the map and count how many you found. Then, compare your findings with your friends to see if everyone got the same number or discovered something different!

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Fig. 7.8. The Gupta Empire's extent. Note that the Vākāṭakas were the allies of the Guptas. The Guptas claim to have conquered parts of the east coast, down to the Pallavas, whom they may have briefly subdued.

A Traveller's Account of Indian Society in the Gupta Age

Chinese traveller Faxian (pronounced as Fa-Shi-Anne) visited India in the early 5th century CE. He set out on this long and difficult pilgrimage to visit sacred Buddhist sites, learn from renowned Indian scholars and collect manuscripts of Buddhist texts so he could take them back to China. Faxian travelled extensively across India, observing her culture, governance and society, and recorded his experiences and observations for the people of his homeland — and for us too — since his travelogue has survived to this day!

Below is an excerpt from his travelogue, where he records his observations of the society in the Gupta era.

The people are numerous and happy [...] they have no need to register households or attend to officials. [...] Those who farm royal land pay a portion of their grain. [...] The king's guards and attendants have salaries [...] The cities are the greatest in the Middle Kingdom [i.e. the Gangetic plains], and the inhabitants are rich, prosperous, and practice kindness and righteousness. Heads of Vaishya families [i.e. merchants or traders] establish houses for charity and medicines [...] the poor, orphans and the sick are cared for [...] doctors provide treatment, and the needy receive food and medicines. [...] The city has many wealthy Vaishya elders and foreign merchants, with beautiful homes [...] The lanes are kept in good order.

– A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms (AD 399–414) (Translated by J. Legge)

LET'S EXPLORE

Read the excerpt from Faxian given above and identify the key features of the society he describes. Write down your observations and compare your notes with your friends — you might be surprised to see how differently others interpret the same text!

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Outcastes: Someone who has been rejected from a social or cultural group; in this case, a category of people considered socially too low to be part of the varṇa system.

Excerpts from historical accounts like Faxian's are valuable sources, but they reflect only the writer's perspective and focus at one point in time and for a limited portion of the society they describe. Let us not, however, forget that elsewhere in his travelogue, Faxian also describes the harsh treatment of the *chanḍālas*, who were regarded as **outcastes** and lived outside the city limits.

Just as you may have perceived the excerpt from Faxian's travelogue differently from your friends, a group of historians may examine the same source and draw varied interpretations from it. Historians then look at more sources to corroborate their understanding. This reminds us of the need to assess multiple sources, perspectives and interpretations before drawing conclusions.

Glimpses of the Gupta Empire

Governance and administration

Let us observe the map in Fig. 7.8. You will notice that many kingdoms coexisted during the same period. Some of them may have been at war with each other in their ambition to expand their control. Recall what we saw earlier about Kauṭilya's ideas on ruling a kingdom. He advised rulers to form alliances *(mitra)* as one of the components of the *saptānga*.

New kings ... new titles

Inscriptions and coins provide valuable insights into the titles adopted by Gupta rulers, such as '*mahārājadhirāja*', 'samrāṭ', and '*chakravartin*'. These titles reflected their claim to supreme authority and emphasised their superiority over earlier rulers who used simpler titles like '*rājan*' and '*mahārāja*'.

The Gupta rulers used various strategies, including military conquests, diplomacy, and alliances, to expand and consolidate their vast empire. The last method included matrimonial alliances. A well-known example is that of Prabhāvatī Gupta,

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daughter of Chandragupta II, who was married to a prince of the Vākāṭaka kingdom — the Guptas' neighbours to the south. Tragically, the Vākāṭaka prince died early, making her the **regent ruler** of the kingdom. During her reign, she ensured that the ties between the Vākāṭakas and the Guptas remained strong. One of her inscriptions describes her as a 'mother of two kings', referring to her two sons who ascended the Vākāṭaka throne. As a devotee of Viṣhṇu like her father, Prabhāvatī is also associated with the construction of seven temples dedicated to this god and his avatars. Some of these temples are in Ramagiri (Ramtek hill) in present-day Maharashtra.

Regent Ruler: A regent temporarily governs a kingdom for a monarch unable to do so until they can.

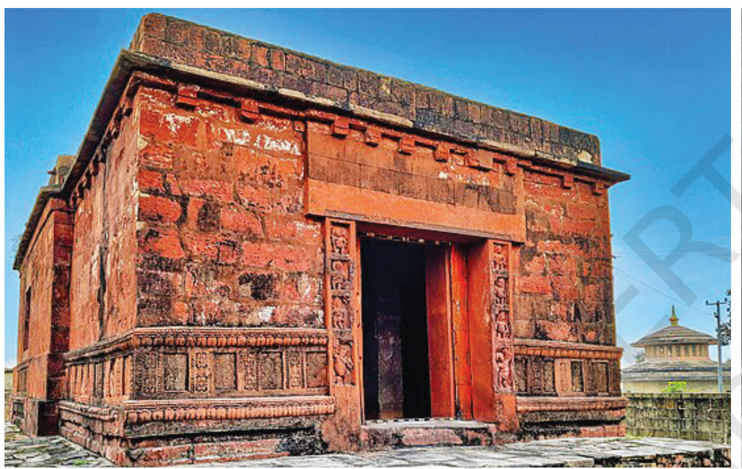

Fig. 7.9. The Kevala Narasimha temple dedicated to Narasimha, one of the avatars of Viṣhṇu; according to some historians, this temple was constructed by Prabhāvatī Gupta's daughter in her memory

LET'S EXPLORE

Observe the painting of Prabhāvatī Gupta sitting in her court (Fig. 7.10). Take note of the details — her attire, posture, the people around her, and the setting of the court. What do these elements tell you about her life, role, and the time she lived in? Discuss your observations in groups and share your insights with the class.

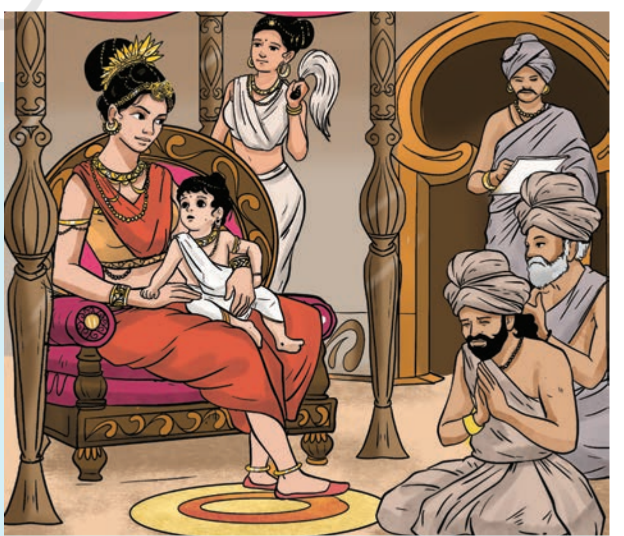

Fig. 7.10. An artist's reimagination of Prabhāvatī Gupta sitting in her court

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The Gupta Empire had a well-organised system of administration. Instead of controlling everything from a central authority, they divided the empire into provinces and granted land to local rulers, priests and chieftains. These land grants were carefully inscribed on copper plates to keep accurate records — many of which have been discovered by archaeologists in recent times. This system helped ensure proper tax collection and allowed the Gupta rulers to govern efficiently while still giving local leaders some control over their regions.

Thriving trade

The primary source of revenue of the Gupta's was land tax. Other sources included fines, taxes on mines, irrigation, trade and crafts. This revenue was used for administration, maintaining the army, building temples and infrastructure, and supporting scholars and artists.

As we see once again, for such an empire to sustain itself, it had to promote a vibrant internal and external trade. In the Gupta era, India traded with the Mediterranean world, Southeast Asia and China, exporting textiles, spices, ivory and gemstones. The Indian Ocean trade network connected Indian ports to distant markets. One significant stop on the way to the Mediterranean markets was Socotra Island, strategically located in the Arabian Sea. Archaeological evidence, such as pottery, inscriptions in the Brahmi script, and designs such as a Buddhist *stūpa*, has established the presence of Indian traders there over several centuries, apart from traders from Egypt, Arabia, Rome and Greece. This small island carries evidence of the rich cultural exchanges that trade promoted in the Indian Ocean.

New Ideas and Wonders: The Classical Age

As we saw, Gupta rulers were devout followers of Viṣhṇu; this is often reflected in their coins and inscriptions. However, they also supported other traditions and schools of thought. They patronised Buddhist institutions, including the renowned Nālandā university and several other Buddhist *vihāras* (monastery). Their approach was inclusive and open. We will explore these institutions further in higher grades.

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Fig. 7.11. Remains of Nalanda University

Indeed, the prolonged period of peace and stability during the Gupta period promoted notable achievements in various fields, leading some historians to label this period the 'classical age' of India. It was also the time when knowledge from previous eras was consolidated and compiled into numerous texts. Sanskrit literature flourished, with Kālidāsa's works and many major Purāṇas. Āryabhaṭa and Varāhamihira recorded major advancements in mathematics and astronomy, while medical texts compiled and refined medical theories and practices. Metallurgy also progressed, as we saw with the rust-resistant Iron Pillar. This stability strengthened the economy, allowing the state to support scholars, artists, and scientists, leading to cultural and intellectual growth.

Chandragupta II kept himself surrounded by many learned men, poets and artists, and his patronage of such diverse talent enriched his court greatly.

Let us take a look at some of the remarkable figures of this period.

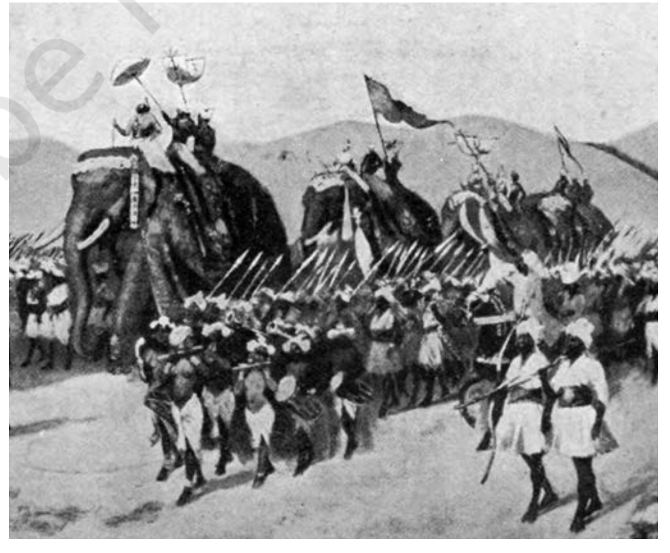

Fig. 7.12. Chandragupta II goes to war (an artist's imagination from the 1920s)

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Āryabhaṭa: He lived in Kusumapura (near present-day Patna), a famous centre of learning, around 500 CE and authored a short treatise of mathematics and astronomy called *Āryabhaṭīya*. He gave formulas to calculate the motions of the Sun, the Moon and the planets, and proposed that the Earth spins on its axis, which explains the alternation of day and night. He gave the length of a year as 365 days, 6 hours, 12 minutes, and 30 seconds, just a few minutes off from the modern value (365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 45 seconds). Āryabhaṭa also provided a fair estimate of the size of the Earth and a correct explanation for solar and lunar eclipses. His work became the foundation for further scientific advances in India and beyond. In mathematics, Āryabhaṭa described a number of techniques of calculation and equation-solving, some of which you learn at school without knowing that they were first formulated 1500 years ago!

Fig. 7.13

Varāhamihira: He was a mathematician, astronomer and astrologer from the same period. He lived in Ujjayinī, a city famous for its tradition of learning and scholarship. His encyclopedic work, *Bṛihat Samhitā*, covered a wide range of subjects from astronomy and astrology to weather forecasting, architecture, town planning and even farming. His ability to observe the world, apply logical reasoning, and combine it with traditional knowledge made him a pioneer in science.

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LET'S EXPLORE

Let's join Bhavisha and Dhruv with their time machine in the time of the Guptas. You are getting an opportunity to meet Āryabhaṭa and Varāhamihira—what would you ask them? Divide the class into two groups and create a series of questions for an interview with them.

Fig. 7.14. The yakṣha's message to the clouds – a scene from Meghadūtam.

Kālidāsa: Little is known about Kālidāsa's life; legends suggest that he was once ridiculed by others, which motivated him to work hard and transform his life. He is renowned for his contributions to Sanskrit literature and exquisitely refined poetry. One of his celebrated compositions is *Meghadūtam*, or 'The Cloud Messenger'. It tells the story of a *yakṣha* (minor deity), who, after being banished from his home by his master, sends a message to his beloved through a passing cloud. Apart from the many emotions of love, the poem describes in great detail the landscapes and weather of north India on its journey to the beloved.

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DON'T MISS OUT

Did you know that Āyurveda got **codified** during the Gupta period? This Indian traditional system of medicine has much older roots, going back several centuries BCE. Texts like the *Charaka Saṃhitā* and *Suśhruta Saṃhitā*, which laid the foundation for Ayurvedic practices still in use today, were compiled and given their final shape during the Gupta period. They deal with a wide range of topics—the cataloguing and diagnosing of diseases, their treatments, the importance of diet in maintaining good health, the preparation of medicines, and surgical techniques advanced for their time. Importantly, Āyurveda emphasises holistic healing and a deep connection between the mind, body, and nature.

Codified: Arranged or written in an organised and systematic way.

The Quest for Beauty

The Gupta rulers created a supportive environment where creativity and craftsmanship thrived; some of the iconic works of history were produced during this time. Many key centres of art emerged during these times, including Sārnāth (near Varanasi in present-day Uttar Pradesh), known for its exquisite sculptures of the Buddha, and the awe-inspiring Ajanta caves (in present-day Maharashtra). The rock-cut caves and detailed carvings of deities at Udayagiri (Madhya Pradesh) are another example of this abundant artistic production. 'Gupta art', as it is sometimes called, set high standards of aesthetics and beauty that left a lasting impact. (See Figures 7.15 to 7.18)

LET'S EXPLORE

Take a close look at the samples of Gupta sculptures shown in Fig 7.15.1. and 7.15.2. By looking at the attributes, can you guess which deities are depicted here? Write your observations in the space provided and share your thoughts during the class discussion!

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The Decline of the Guptas

By the 6th century CE, the Gupta Empire began showing signs of decline as the later rulers faced challenges from external invasions. The fierce Hūṇa tribe from central Asia repeatedly attacked the empire, weakening its control over north India. At the same time, the rise of powerful regional rulers led to internal conflicts. However, was this truly the end, or the beginning of a period that marked a turning point in Indian history? We will explore this question in the next part of this book.

Meanwhile in the South and Northeast …

Let us go back to the map in Fig. 7.8. While the Guptas ruled in the north, the Pallavas emerged as a powerful dynasty in the south, gradually consolidating their power in parts of present-day Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Their origins are not clearly known, but they appear to have been a tributary power under the Sātavāhanas, whom we encountered in the previous chapter, and to have gained power as the Sātavāhanas declined.

The Pallavas were also great patrons of art and architecture. Most of them were devotees of Śhiva and are credited with constructing magnificent temples and rock-cut caves, some of which we will visit when we explore classical Indian architecture. The capital of the Pallavas, Kānchipuram (in present-day Tamil Nadu), often known as the 'city of a thousand temples', developed as one of the major centres of learning in the south. The establishment of *ghaṭikās* — centres of learning that emerged during the reign of the Sātavāhanas — fostered an environment for education and intellectual growth.

In the northeastern region, the Kāmarūpa kingdom, ruled by the Varman dynasty, extended over the Brahmaputra valley (broadly, present-day Assam) and northern parts of present-day Bengal and Bangladesh. An ancient name for the Brahmaputra valley of Assam is Prāgjyotiṣha, mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata; the latter text mentions Bhagadatta, king of

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Various aspects of Gupta art

Fig. 7.15.1 to 7.15.3. In the 3rd image, these terracotta sculptures from the Gupta period (Ahichchhatra, western Uttar Pradesh) depict India's sacred rivers, Ganga and Yamuna. Their vāhanas distinguish them: Ganga stands on a makara (a mythical creature akin to a crocodile), while Yamuna stands on a tortoise. Water flows over their heads, and the pot is another reminder of their manifestation as rivers.

Fig. 7.16. (Left) Deogarh (Uttar Pradesh), (Right) Viṣhṇu on Śheṣhnāg from Daśhāvatāra temple

Fig. 7.17. The renowned Ajanta Caves were carved out during this period with the support of the Guptas and Vākāṭakas. Left: An elaborate cave replicating a temple with a central stūpa from which a seated Buddha emerges (note the arched roof imitating wooden beams). Right: A painting of Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi.

Fig. 7.18.1. to 7.18.3. Udayagiri Caves and a Gupta-era temple near Sanchi are both located in Madhya Pradesh. Arjuna and Karṇa in battle — A sculpted depiction from the Mahābhārata

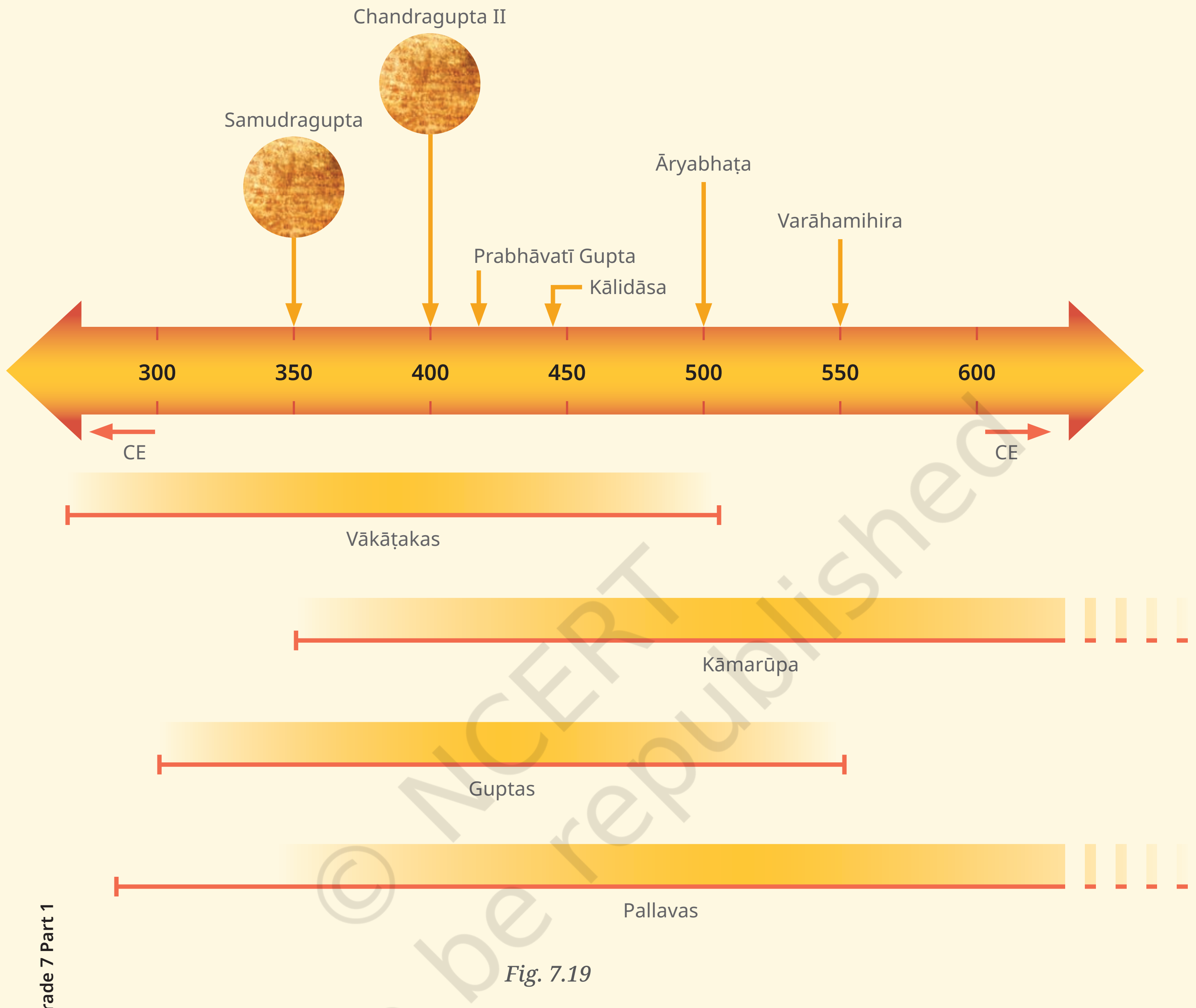

Fig. 7.19

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Prāgjyotiṣha (modern-day Assam), as fighting on the side of the Kauravas in the Great War, and some historical rulers claimed him among their ancestors. Be that as it may, the Kāmarūpa kingdom was a prominent cultural and political centre; temples and monasteries flourished as hubs of learning.

Both the Pallavas and Kāmarūpa are mentioned in the *prayāga praśhasti* we saw earlier. During his southern campaigns, Samudragupta defeated a Pallava ruler but did not take over the region. Instead, he let the local kings, including the Pallavas,

keep their thrones as long as they accepted his rule and paid tribute. This helped maintain peaceful relations. Under similar conditions, in the northeast, Samudragupta defeated the ruler of Kāmarūpa but did not take direct control. By now, we have seen this pattern recur quite a few times.

The Gupta period was a time of remarkable progress. Its influence stretched far beyond the empire, shaping art, science, literature, and governance for centuries. Advances in mathematics, astronomy, medicine and metallurgy, among other fields, laid the foundation for future scientific and technological growth, while beautiful temples and Sanskrit literature continue to inspire today. The Guptas created a stable and prosperous society, setting a model for future rulers. Their legacy is still alive in India's culture, traditions, and way of life, marking this era as one of the high points in Indian history.

Before we move on ...

- The Gupta kings consolidated their power through military campaigns, land grants and matrimonial alliances to ensure stability in the empire.
- The period saw remarkable contributions in the fields of art, literature, science and mathematics.
- Other than the Guptas, dynasties like Vākāṭakas, Pallavas, and Varmans ruled in their respective regions, making this period full of cultural and intellectual vibrancy.

Questions and activities

1. Imagine you receive a letter from someone living in the Gupta Empire. The letter starts like this:
   "*Greetings from Pāṭaliputra! Life here is vibrant and full of excitement. Just yesterday, I witnessed ...*" Complete the letter with a short paragraph (250–300 words) describing life in the Gupta Empire.

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2. Which Gupta ruler was also known as the 'Vikramāditya'?
3. "Periods of peace support the development of various aspects of sociocultural life, literature, and the development of science and technology.' Examine this statement in the light of the Gupta empire.
4. Recreate a scene from a Gupta ruler's court.
   Write a short script, assign roles like the king, ministers, and scholars, and enact a role play to bring the Gupta era to life!
5. Match the two columns:

Column A	Column B
(1) Kānchipuram	(a) Known for vibrant cave paintings that depict the Jātaka tales.
(2) Ujjayinī	(b) Famous for rock-cut caves featuring intricate carvings of Hindu deities, especially Viṣhṇu.
(3) Udayagiri	(c) Capital of the Guptas.
(4) Ajanta	(d) Known as 'a city of a thousand temples'.
(5) Pāṭaliputra	(e) A prominent centre of learning in ancient India.

6. Who were the Pallavas and where did they rule?
7. Organise an exploration trip with your teachers to a nearby historical site, museum, or heritage building. After the trip, write a detailed report describing your experience. Include key observations about the site's historical significance, the architecture, artefacts, and any interesting facts you learned during the visit. Reflect on how the trip enhanced your understanding of history.

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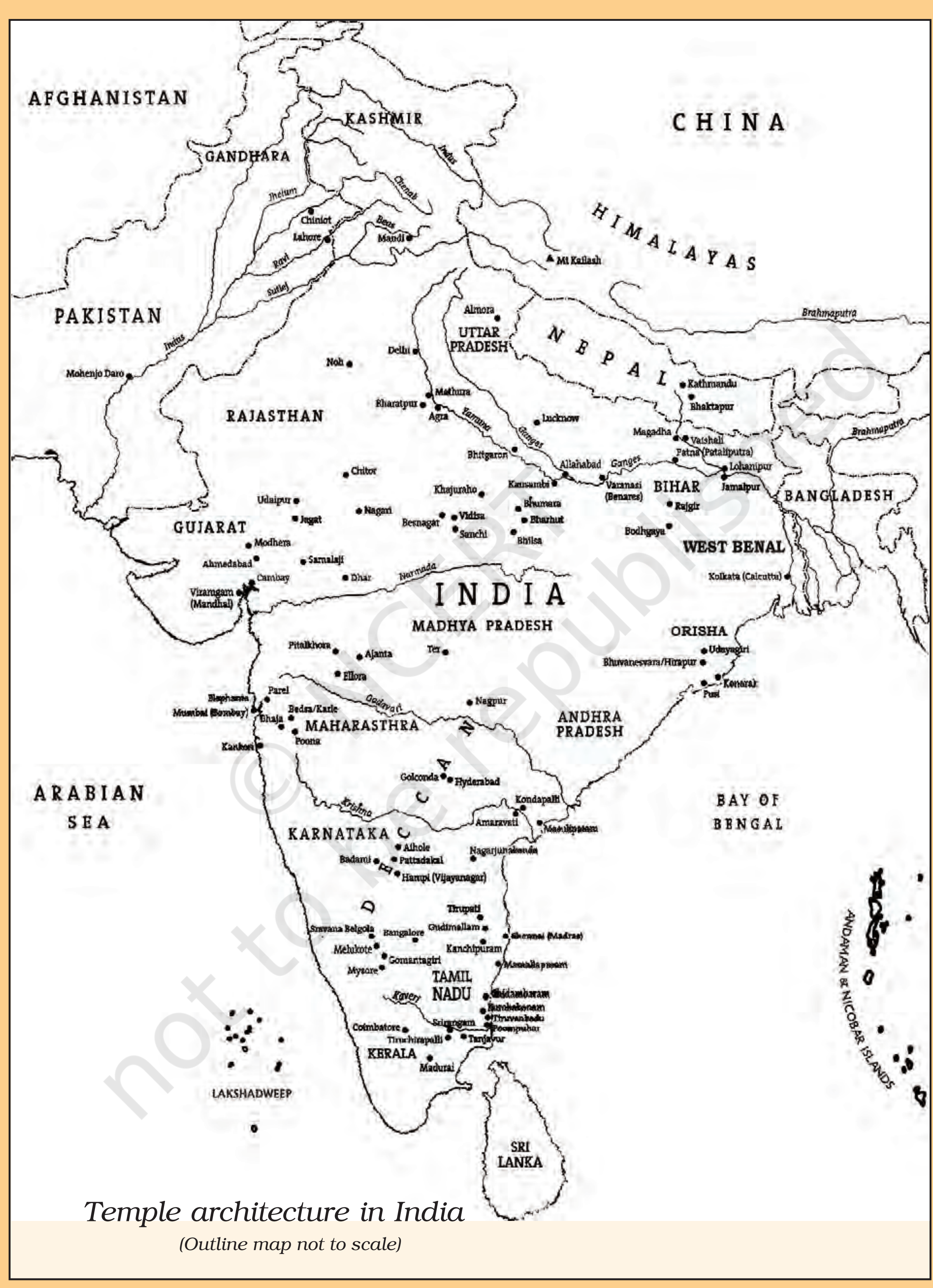
The Gupta Empire

Class 11th NCERT Fine Arts

Chapter 6



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Temple architecture in India

(Outline map not to scale)

6 TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE

MOST of the art and architectural remains that survive from Ancient and Medieval India are religious in nature. That does not mean that people did not have art in their homes at those times, but domestic dwellings and the things in them were mostly made from materials like wood and clay which have perished. This chapter introduces us to many types of temples from India. Although we have focussed mostly on Hindu temples, at the end of the chapter you will find some information on major Buddhist and Jain temples too. However, at all times, we must keep in mind that religious shrines were also made for many local cults in villages and forest areas, but again, not being of stone the ancient or medieval shrines in those areas have also vanished.

Today when we say 'temple' in English we generally mean a *devalaya, devkula mandir, kovil, deol, devasthanam or prasada* depending on which part of India we are in.

Early Temples

While construction of *stupas* continued, Brahmanical temples and images of gods also started getting constructed. Often temples were decorated with the images of gods. Myths mentioned in the *Puranas* became part of narrative representation of the Brahmanical religion. Each temple had a principal image of a god. The shrines of the temples were of three kinds—(i) *sandhara* type (with *pradikshinapatha*), (ii) *nirandhara* type (without *pradakshinapatha*), and (iii) *sarvatobhadra* (which can be accessed from all sides). Some of the important temple sites of this period are Deogarh in Uttar

Chatur Mukhlinga, Nachna- Kuthara (Inset)

Shiva temple, Nachna-Kuthara, Madhya Pradesh, fifth century CE

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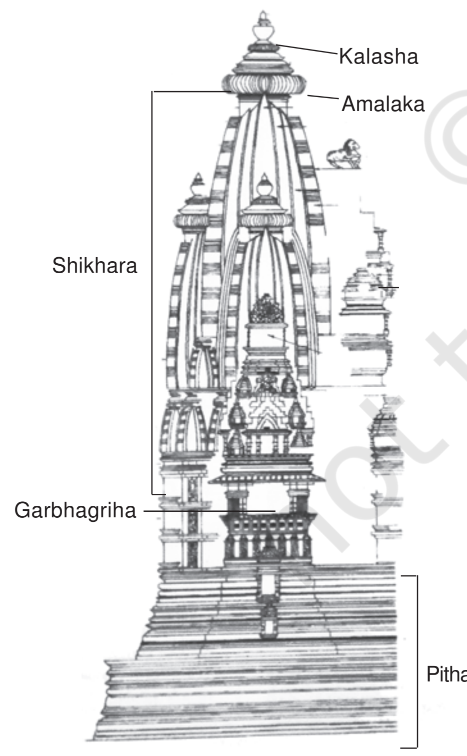
Pradesh, Eran, Nachna-Kuthara and Udaygiri near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh. These temples are simple structures consisting of a veranda, a hall and a shrine at the rear.

THE BASIC FORM OF THE HINDU TEMPLE

The basic form of the Hindu temple comprises the following: (i) sanctum (*garbhagriha* literally 'womb-house'), which was a small cubicle with a single entrance and grew into a larger chamber in time. The *garbhagriha* is made to house the main icon which is itself the focus of much ritual attention; (ii) the entrance to the temple which may be a portico or colonnaded hall that incorporates space for a large number of worshippers and is known as a *mandapa*; (iii) freestanding temples tend to have a mountain-like spire, which can take the shape of a curving *shikhar* in North India and a pyramidal tower, called a *vimana,* in South India; (iv) the *vahan*, i.e., the mount or vehicle of the temple's main deity along with a standard pillar or *dhvaj* is placed axially before the sanctum. Two broad orders of temples in the country are known— *Nagara* in the north and *Dravida* in the south. At times, the *Vesar* style of temples as an independent style created through the selective mixing of the *Nagara* and *Dravida* orders is mentioned by some scholars. Elaborate studies are available on the various sub-styles within these orders. We will look into the differences in the forms further on in this chapter. As temples grew more complex, more surfaces were created for sculpture through additive geometry, i.e., by adding more and more rhythmically projecting, symmetrical walls and niches, without breaking away from the fundamental plan of the shrine.



Nagara temple

SCULPTURE, ICONOGRAPHY AND ORNAMENTATION

The study of images of deities falls within a branch of art history called 'iconography', which consists of identification of images based on certain symbols and mythologies associated with them. And very often, while the fundamental myth and meaning of the deity may remain the same for centuries, its specific usage at a spot can be a response to its local or immediate social, political or geographical context.

Every region and period produced its own distinct style of images with its regional variations in iconography. The temple is covered with elaborate sculpture and ornament that form a fundamental part of its conception. The placement of an image in a temple is carefully planned:

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for instance, river goddesses (Ganga and Yamuna) are usually found at the entrance of a *garbhagriha* in a *Nagara* temple, *dvarapalas* (doorkeepers) are usually found on the gateways or *gopurams* of *Dravida* temples, similarly, *mithunas* (erotic images), *navagrahas* (the nine auspicious planets) and *yakshas* are also placed at entrances to guard them. Various forms or aspects of the main divinity are to be found on the outer walls of the sanctum. The deities of directions, i.e., the *ashtadikpalas* face the eight key directions on the outer walls of the sanctum and/or on the outer walls of a temple. Subsidiary shrines around the main temple are dedicated to the family or incarnations of the main deity. Finally, various elements of ornamentation such as *gavaksha, vyala/yali, kalpa-lata, amalaka, kalasha,* etc. are used in distinct ways and places in a temple.

THE *NAGARA* OR NORTH INDIAN TEMPLE STYLE

The style of temple architecture that became popular in northern India is known as *nagara*. In North India it is common for an entire temple to be built on a stone platform with steps leading up to it. Further, unlike in South India it does not usually have elaborate boundary walls or gateways. While the earliest temples had just one tower, or *shikhara*, later temples had several. The *garbhagriha* is always located directly under the tallest tower.

There are many subdivisions of *nagara* temples depending on the shape of the *shikhara*. There are different names for the various parts of the temple in different parts

Sun temple, Konark

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of India; however, the most common name for the simple *shikhara* which is square at the base and whose walls curve or slope inward to a point on top is called the 'latina' or the *rekha-prasada* type of shikara.

The second major type of architectural form in the *nagara* order is the *phamsana*. *Phamsana* buildings tend to be broader and shorter than latina ones. Their roofs are composed of several slabs that gently rise to a single point over the centre of the building, unlike the latina ones which look like sharply rising tall towers. *Phamsana* roofs do not curve inward, instead they slope upwards on a straight incline. In many North Indian temples you will notice that the *phamsana* design is used for the *mandapas* while the main *garbhagriha* is housed in a latina building. Later on, the latina buildings grew complex, and instead of appearing like a single tall tower, the temple began to support many smaller towers, which were clustered together like rising mountain-peaks with the tallest one being in the centre, and this was the one which was always above the *garbhagriha*.

The third main sub-type of the *nagara* building is what is generally called the *valabhi* type. These are rectangular buildings with a roof that rises into a vaulted chamber. The edge of this vaulted chamber is rounded, like the bamboo or wooden wagons that would have been drawn by bullocks in ancient times. They are usually called 'wagon-vaulted buildings'. As mentioned above, the form of the temple is influenced by ancient building forms that were already in existence before the fifth century CE. The *valabhi* type of building was one of them. For instance, if you study

Dashavtara Vishnu temple, Deogarh, fifth century CE

Sheshashayana Vishnu, Dashavatara temple, Deogarh

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the ground-plan of many of the Buddhist rock-cut *chaitya* caves, you will notice that they are shaped as long halls which end in a curved back. From the inside, the roof of this portion also looks like a wagon-vaulted roof.

Central India

Ancient temples of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan share many traits. The most visible is that they are made of sandstone. Some of the oldest surviving structural temples from the Gupta Period are in Madhya Pradesh. These are relatively modest-looking shrines each having four pillars that support a small *mandapa* which looks like a simple square porch-like extension before an equally small room that served as the *garbhagriha*. Importantly, of the two such temples that survive, one is at Udaigiri, which is on the outskirts of Vidisha and is part of a larger Hindu complex of cave shrines, while the other one is at Sanchi, near the stupa. This is the first temple having a flat roof. This means that similar developments were being incorporated in the architecture of temples of both the religions.

Deogarh (in Lalitpur District, Uttar Pradesh) was built in the early sixth century CE. That is, about a hundred years or so after the small temples we just learnt about in Sanchi and Udaigiri. This makes it a classic example of a late Gupta Period type of temple. This temple is in the *panchayatana* style of architecture where the main shrine is built on a rectangular plinth with four smaller subsidiary shrines at the four corners (making it a total number of five shrines, hence the name, *panchayatana*). The tall and curvilinear *shikhara* also corroborates this date. The presence of this curving latina or *rekha-prasada* type of *shikhara* also makes it clear that this is an early example of a classic *nagara* style of temple.

> ***Sheshashayana*** is the form of Vishnu where he is shown reclining on the *sheshanaga* called Ananta. ***Nara-Narayan*** shows the discussion between the human soul and the eternal divine. ***Gajendramoksha*** is the story of achieving *moksha*, symbolically communicated by Vishnu's suppression of an *asura* who had taken the form of an elephant.

This west-facing temple has a grand doorway with standing sculptures of female figures representing the Ganga on the left side and the Yamuna on the right side. The temple depicts Vishnu in various forms, due to which it was assumed that the four subsidiary shrines must also

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Vishwanatha temple, Khajuraho

have housed Vishnu's *avatars* and the temple was mistaken for a *dasavatara* temple. In fact, it is not actually known to whom the four subsidiary shrines were originally dedicated. There are three main reliefs of Vishnu on the temple walls: *Sheshashayana* on the south, *Nara-Narayan* on the east and *Gajendramoksha* on the west. The temple is west-facing, which is less common, as most temples are east- or north-facing.

Numerous temples of smaller dimensions have been constructed over a period of time. By contrast, if we study the temples of Khajuraho made by the Chandela Kings in the tenth century, i.e., about four hundred years after the temple at Deogarh, we can see how dramatically the shape and style of the *nagara* temple architecture had developed.

The Lakshmana temple of Khajuraho, dedicated to Vishnu, was built in 954 by the Chandela king, Dhanga. A *nagara* temple, it is placed on a high platform accessed by stairs. There are four smaller temples in the corners, and all the towers or *shikharas* rise high, upward in a curved pyramidal fashion, emphasising the temple's vertical thrust ending in a horizontal fluted disc called an *amalak* topped with a *kalash* or vase. The crowning elements: *amalak* and *kalash*, are to be found on all *nagara* temples of this period. The temple also has projecting balconies and verandahs, thus very different from Deogarh.

Kandariya Mahadeo temple, Khajuraho

Kandariya Mahadeo temple at Khajuraho is the epitome of temple architecture in Central India. In the architecture and the sculptures of this temple, which is a massive structure, we see all features of central Indian temples of the medival period for which they are known and appreciated all over. Khajuraho's temples are also known for their extensive erotic sculptures; the erotic expression is given equal importance in human experience as spiritual pursuit, and it is seen as part of a larger cosmic whole. Many Hindu temples, therefore, feature *mithun* (embracing couple) sculptures, considered auspicious. Usually, they are placed at the entrance of the temple or on an exterior

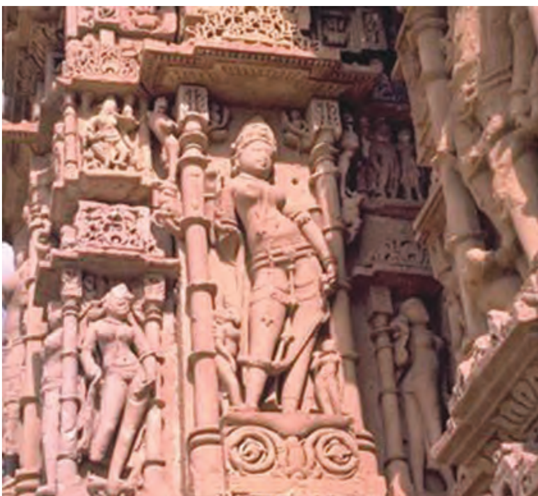
Dance class, Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho

wall or they may also be placed on the walls between the *mandapa* and the main shrine. Khajuraho's sculptures are highly stylised with typical features: they are in almost full relief, cut away from the surrounding stone, with sharp noses, prominent chins, long slanting eyes and eyebrows.

There are many temples at Khajuraho, most of them devoted to Hindu gods. There are some Jain temples as well as a Chausanth Yogini temple, which is of interest. Predating the tenth century, this is a temple of small, square shrines of roughly-hewn granite blocks, each dedicated to *devis* or goddesses associated with the rise of *Tantric* worship after the seventh century. Several such temples were dedicated to the cult of the *yoginis* across Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and even as far south as Tamil Nadu. They were built between the seventh and tenth centuries, but few have survived.

West India

The temples in the north-western parts of India including Gujarat and Rajasthan, and stylistically extendable, at times, to western Madhya Pradesh are too numerous to include



Sun temple, Modhera, Gujarat

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Sun temple, Modhera, Gujarat

here in any comprehensive way. The stone used to build the temples ranges in colour and type. While sandstone is the commonest, a grey to black basalt can be seen in some of the tenth to twelveth century temple sculptures. The most exuberant and famed is the manipulatable soft white marble which is also seen in some of the tenth to twelveth century Jain temples in Mount Abu and the fifteenth century temple at Ranakpur.

Among the most important art-historical sites in the region is Samlaji in Gujarat which shows how earlier artistic traditions of the region mixed with a post-Gupta style and gave rise to a distinct style of sculpture. A large number of sculptures made of grey schist have been found in this region which can be dated between the sixth and eighth centuries CE. While the patronage of these is debated, the date is established on the basis of the style.

The Sun temple at Modhera dates back to early eleventh century and was built by Raja Bhimdev I of the Solanki Dynasty in 1026. There is a massive rectangular stepped tank called the *surya kund* in front of it. Proximity of sacred architecture to a water body such as a tank, a river or a pond has been noticed right from the earliest times. By the early eleventh century they had become a part of many temples. This hundred-square-metre rectangular pond is perhaps the grandest temple tank in India. A hundred and eight miniature shrines are carved in between the steps inside the tank. A huge ornamental arch-*torana* leads one to the *sabha mandapa* (the assembly hall) which is open on all sides, as was the fashion of the times in western and central Indian temples.

The influence of the woodcarving tradition of Gujarat is evident in the lavish carving and sculpture work. However, the walls of the central small shrine are devoid of carving and are left plain as the temple faces the east and, every year, at the time of the equinoxes, the sun shines directly into this central shrine.

East India

Eastern Indian temples include those found in the North-East, Bengal and Odisha. Each of these three areas produced distinct types of temples. The history of architecture in the North-East and Bengal is hard to study because a number of ancient buildings in those regions

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Kamakhya Temple, Assam

were renovated, and what survives now are later brick or concrete temples at those sites. It appears that terracotta was the main medium of construction, and also for moulding plaques which depicted Buddhist and Hindu deities in Bengal until the seventh century. A large number of sculptures have been found in Assam and Bengal which shows the development of important regional schools in those regions.

Assam: An old sixth-century sculpted door frame from DaParvatia near Tezpur and another few stray sculptures from Rangagora Tea Estate near Tinsukia in Assam bear witness to the import of the Gupta idiom in that region. This post-Gupta style continued in the region well into the tenth century. However, by the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, a distinct regional style developed in Assam. The style that came with the migration of the Tais from Upper Burma mixed with the dominant Pala style of Bengal and led to the creation of what was later known as the Ahom style in and around Guwahati. Kamakhya temple, *a Shakti Peeth*, is dedicated to Goddess Kamakhya and was built in the seventeenth century.

Bengal: The style of the sculptures during the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries in Bengal (including Bangladesh) and Bihar is known as the Pala style, named after the ruling dynasty at the time, while the style of those of the mid-eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries is named after the Sena kings. While the Palas are celebrated as patrons of many Buddhist monastic sites, the temples from that region are known to express the local Vanga style. The ninth century Siddheshvara

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Terracotta temple, Vishnupur

Mahadeva temple in Barakar in Burdwan District, for example, shows a tall curving *shikhara* crowned by a large *amalaka* and is an example of the early Pala style. It is similar to contemporaneous temples of Odisha. This basic form grows loftier with the passing of centuries. Many of the temples from the ninth to the twelfth century were located at Telkupi in Purulia District. They were submerged when dams were built in the region. These were amongst the important examples of architectural styles prevalent in the region which showed an awareness of all the known *nagara* sub-types that were prevalent in the rest of North India. However, several temples still survive in Purulia District which can be dated to this period. The black to grey basalt and chlorite stone pillars and arched niches of these temples heavily influenced the earliest Bengal *sultanate* buildings at Gaur and Pandua. Many local vernacular building traditions of Bengal also influenced the style of temples in that region. Most prominent of these was the shape of the curving or sloping side of the bamboo roof of a Bengali hut. This feature was eventually even adopted in Mughal buildings, and is known across North India as the Bangla roof. In the Mughal period and later, scores of terracotta brick temples were built across Bengal and Bangladesh in a unique style that had elements of local building techniques seen in bamboo huts which were combined with older forms reminiscent of the Pala period and with the forms of arches and domes that were taken from Islamic architecture. These can be widely found in and around Vishnupur, Bankura, Burdwan and Birbhum and are dated mostly to the seventeenth century.

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Stone Chariot, Hampi, Karnataka

Odisha: The main architectural features of Odisha temples are classified in three orders, i.e., *rekhapida*, *pidhadeul* and *khakra*. Most of the main temple sites are located in ancient Kalinga—modern Puri District, including Bhubaneswar or ancient Tribhuvanesvara, Puri and Konark. The temples of Odisha constitute a distinct sub-style within the *nagara* order. In general, here the *shikhara*, called *deul* in Odisha, is vertical almost until the top when it suddenly curves sharply inwards. *Deuls* are preceded, as usual, by *mandapas* called *jagamohana* in Odisha. The ground plan of the main temple is almost always square, which, in the upper reaches of its superstructure becomes circular in the crowning *mastaka*. This makes the spire nearly cylindrical in appearance in its length. Compartments and niches are generally square, the exterior of the temples are lavishly carved, their interiors generally quite bare. Odisha temples usually have boundary walls.

At Konark, on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, lie the majestic ruins of the Surya or Sun temple built in stone around 1240. Its *shikhara* was a colossal creation said to have reached 70m, which, proving too heavy for its site, fell in the nineteenth century. The vast complex is within a quadrilateral precinct of which the *jagamohana* or the dance-pavillion (*mandapa*) has survived, which though no longer accessible is said to be the largest enclosed space in Hindu architecture.

The Sun temple is set on a high base, its walls covered in extensive, detailed ornamental carving. These include twelve pairs of enormous wheels sculpted with spokes and

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Jagannath temple, Puri

hubs, representing the chariot wheels of the Sun god who, in mythology, rides a chariot driven by seven horses, sculpted here at the entrance staircase. The whole temple thus comes to resemble a colossal processional chariot. On the southern wall is a massive sculpture of *surya* carved out of green stone. It is said that there were three such images, each carved out of a different stone placed on the three temple walls, each facing different directions. The fourth wall had the doorway into the temple from where the actual rays of the sun would enter the *garbhagriha.*

The Hills

A unique form of architecture developed in the hills of Kumaon, Garhwal, Himachal and Kashmir. Kashmir's proximity to prominent Gandhara sites (such as Taxila, Peshawar and the northwest frontier) lent the region a strong Gandhara influence by the fifth century CE. This began to mix with the Gupta and post-Gupta traditions that were brought to it from Sarnath, Mathura and even centres in Gujarat and Bengal. Brahmin *pundits* and Buddhist monks frequently travelled between Kashmir, Garhwal, Kumaon and religious centres in the plains like Banaras, Nalanda and even as far south as Kanchipuram. As a result both Buddhist and Hindu traditions began to intermingle and spread in the hills. The hills also had

Temple complexes in Hills

their own tradition of wooden buildings with pitched roofs. At several places in the hills, therefore, you will find that while the main *garbhagriha* and *shikhara* are made in a *rekha-prasada* or latina style, the *mandapa* is of an older form of wooden architecture. Sometimes, the temple itself takes on a pagoda shape.

The Karkota period of Kashmir is the most significant in terms of architecture. One of the most important temples is Pandrethan, built during the eighth and ninth centuries. In keeping with the tradition of a water tank attached to the shrine, this temple is built on a plinth built in the middle of a tank. Although there are evidences of both Hindu and Buddhist followings in Kashmir, this temple is a Hindu one, possibly dedicated to Shiva. The architecture of this temple is in keeping with the age-old Kashmiri tradition of wooden buildings. Due to the snowy conditions in Kashmir, the roof is peaked and slants slowly outward. The temple is moderately ornamented, moving away from the post-Gupta aesthetics of heavy carving. A row of elephants at the base and a decorated doorway are the only embellishments on the shrine.

Like the findings at Samlaji, the sculptures at Chamba also show an amalgamation of local traditions with a post-Gupta style. The images of *Mahishasuramardini* and *Narasimha* at the *Laksna-Devi Mandir* are evidences of the influence of the post-Gupta tradition. Both the images show the influence of the metal sculpture tradition of Kashmir. The yellow colour of the images is possibly due to an alloy of zinc and copper which were popularly used to make images in Kashmir. This temple bears an inscription that states that it was built during the reign of Meruvarman who lived in the seventh century.

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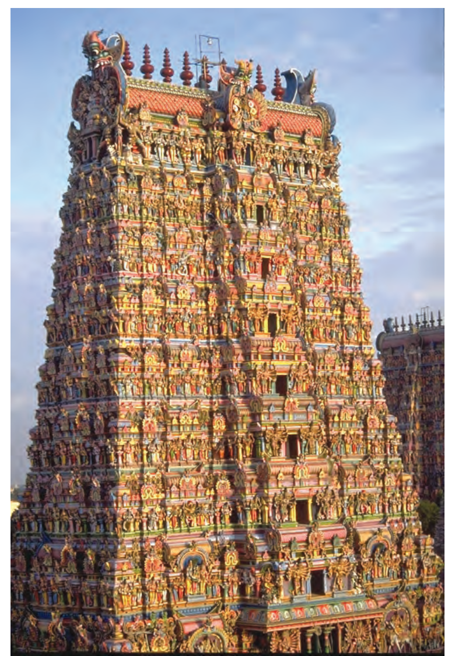


Meenakshi temple, Madurai

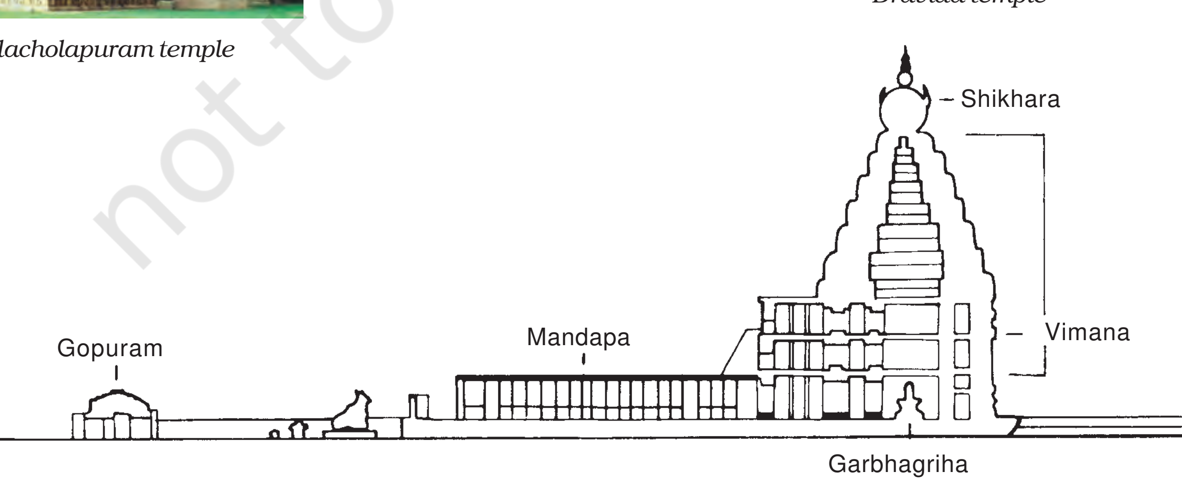
Gangaikondacholapuram temple

Of the temples in Kumaon, the ones at Jageshwar near Almora, and Champavat near Pithoragarh, are classic examples of *nagara* architecture in the region.

THE *DRAVIDA* OR SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLE STYLE

Unlike *the nagara* temple, the *dravida* temple is enclosed within a compound wall. The front wall has an entrance gateway in its centre, which is known as a *gopuram*. The shape of the main temple tower known as *vimana* in Tamil Nadu is like a stepped pyramid that rises up geometrically rather than the curving *shikhara* of North India. In the South Indian temple, the word *'shikhara'* is used only for the crowning element at the top of the temple which is usually shaped like a small *stupika* or an octagonal cupola— this is equivalent to the *amlak* and *kalasha* of North Indian temples. Whereas at the entrance to the North Indian temple's *garbhagriha*, it would be usual to find images such as *mithunas* and the river goddesses, Ganga and Yamuna, in the south you will generally find sculptures of fierce *dvarapalas* or the door-keepers guarding the temple. It is common to find a large water reservoir, or a temple tank, enclosed within the complex. Subsidiary shrines are either incorporated within the main temple tower, or located as distinct, separate small shrines beside the main temple. The North Indian idea of multiple *shikharas* rising together as a cluster was not popular in South India. At some of the most sacred temples in South India, the main temple in which the *garbhagriha* is situated has, in fact, one of the smallest towers. This is because it is usually the oldest part of the temple. With the passage of time, the population and size of the town associated with that temple would have increased, and it would have become necessary to

Dravida temple



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make a new boundary wall around the temple. This would have been taller that the last one, and its *gopurams* would have been even loftier. So, for instance, the Srirangam temple in Tiruchirapally has as many as seven 'concentric' rectangular enclosure walls, each with *gopurams*. The outermost is the newest, while the tower right in the centre housing the *garbhagriha* is the oldest.

Temples thus started becoming the focus of urban architecture. Kanchipuram, Thanjavur or Tanjore, Madurai and Kumbakonam are the most famous temple towns of Tamil Nadu, where, during the eighth to twelfth centuries, the role of the temple was not limited to religious matters alone. Temples became rich administrative centres, controlling vast areas of land.

Just as there are many subdivisions of the main types of *nagara* temples, there are subdivisions also of *dravida* temples. These are basically of five different shapes: square, usually called *kuta*, and also *caturasra*; rectangular or *shala* or *ayatasra*; elliptical, called *gaja-prishta* or elephant-backed, or also called *vrittayata*, deriving from wagon-vaulted shapes of apsidal *chaityas* with a horse-shoe shaped entrance facade usually called a *nasi*; circular or *vritta;* and octagonal or *ashtasra*. Generally speaking, the plan of the temple and the shape of the *vimana* were conditioned by the iconographic nature of the consecrated deity, so it was appropriate to build specific types of temples for specific types of icons. It must, however, be remembered that this is a simplistic differentiation of the subdivisions. Several different shapes may be combined in specific periods and places to create their own unique style.

Shore temple, Mahabalipuram

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Nandi, Brahadeeshwarar

The Pallavas were one of the ancient South Indian dynasties that were active in the Andhra region from the second century CE onwards and moved south to settle in Tamil Nadu. Their history is better documented from the sixth to the eighth century, when they left many inscriptions in stone and several monuments. Their powerful kings spread their empire to various parts of the subcontinent, at times reaching the borders of Odisha, and their links with South–East Asia were also strong. Although they were mostly Shaivite, several Vaishnava shrines also survived from their reign, and there is no doubt that they were influenced by the long Buddhist history of the Deccan.

Their early buildings, it is generally assumed, were rock-cut, while the later ones were structural. However, there is reason to believe that structural buildings were well known even when rock-cut ones were being excavated. The early buildings are generally attributed to the reign of Mahendravarman I, a contemporary of the Chalukyan king, Pulakesin II of Karnataka. Narasimhavarman I, also known as Mamalla, who acceded the Pallava throne around 640 CE, is celebrated for the expansion of the empire, avenging the defeat his father had suffered at the hands of Pulakesin II, and inaugurating most of the building works at Mahabalipuram which is known after him as Mamallapuram.

The shore temple at Mahabalipuram was built later, probably in the reign of Narasimhavarman II, also known as Rajasimha who reigned from 700 to 728 CE. Now it is oriented to the east facing the ocean, but if you study it closely, you will find that it actually houses three shrines,

Brahadeeshwarar, Thanjavur

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Five Rathas, Mahabalipuram

two to Shiva, one facing east and the other west, and a middle one to Vishnu who is shown as *Anantashayana*. This is unusual, because temples generally have a single main shrine and not three areas of worship. This shows that it was probably not originally conceived like this and different shrines may have been added at different times, modified perhaps with the change of patrons. In the compound there is evidence of a water tank, an early example of a *gopuram*, and several other images. Sculptures of the bull, Nandi, Shiva's mount, line the temple walls, and these, along with the carvings on the temple's lower walls have suffered severe disfiguration due to erosion by salt-water laden air over the centuries.

The magnificent Shiva temple of Thanjavur, called the Rajarajeswara or Brahadeeshwarar temple, was completed around 1009 by Rajaraja Chola, and is the largest and tallest of all Indian temples. Temple building was prolific at this time, and over a hundred important temples of the Chola period are in a good state of preservation, and many more are still active shrines. Bigger in scale than anything built by their predecessors, the Pallavas, Chalukyas or Pandyas, this Chola temple's pyramidal multi-storeyed *vimana* rises a massive, 70 metre (230 ft. approx) structure topped by a monolithic *shikhara* which is an octagonal dome-shaped *stupika*. It is in this temple that one notices for the first time two large *gopuras* (gateway towers) with an elaborate sculptural programme which was conceived along with the temple. Huge Nandi-figures dot the corners of the *shikhara*, and the *kalasha* on top by itself is about three metres and eight centimetres in height. Hundreds of stucco figures decorate the *vimana*, although it is possible that some of these may have been added on during the Maratha Period and did not always belong to the Chola Period. The main deity of the temple is Shiva, who is shown as a huge *lingam* set in a two-storeyed

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sanctum. The walls surrounding the sanctum have extended mythological narratives which are depicted through painted murals and sculptures.

Architecture in the Deccan

Many different styles of temple architecture influenced by both North and South Indian temples were used in regions like Karnataka. While some scholars consider the buildings in this region as being distinctly either *nagara* or *dravida*, a hybridised style that seems to have become popular after the mid-seventh century, is known in some ancient texts as *vesara*.

By the late seventh or the early eighth century, the ambitious projects at Ellora became even grander. By about 750 CE, the early western Chalukya control of the Deccan was taken by the Rashtrakutas. Their greatest achievement in architecture is the Kailashnath temple at Ellora, a culmination of at least a millennium-long tradition in rock-cut architecture in India. It is a complete *dravida* building with a Nandi shrine—since the temple is dedicated to Shiva—a *gopuram*-like gateway, surrounding cloisters, subsidiary shrines, staircases and an imposing tower or *vimana* rising to thirty metres. Importantly, all of this is carved out of living rock. One portion of the monolithic hill was carved patiently to build the Kailashnath temple. The sculpture of the Rashtrakuta phase at Ellora is dynamic, the figures often larger than life-size, infused with unparalleled grandeur and the most overwhelming energy.

In the southern part of the Deccan, i.e., in the region of Karnataka is where some of the most experimental

Kailashnath temple, Ellora

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Temple, Badami

hybrid styles of *vesara* architecture are to be found. Pulakesin I established the western Chalukya kingdom when he secured the land around Badami in 543. The early western Chalukyas ruled most of the Deccan till the mid-eighth century when they were superseded by the Rashtrakutas. Early Chalukyan activity also takes the form of rock-cut caves while later activity is of structural temples. The earliest is probably the Ravana Phadi cave at Aihole which is known for its distinctive sculptural style. One of the most important sculptures at the site is of Nataraja, surrounded by larger-than-life-size depictions of the *saptamatrikas*: three to Shiva's left and four to his right. The figures are characterised by graceful, slim bodies, long, oval faces topped with extremely tall cylindrical crowns and shown to wear short *dhotis* marked by fine incised striations indicating pleating. They are distinctly different from

Durga temple, Aihole

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Virupaksha temple, Pattadakal

contemporary western Deccan or Vakataka styles seen at places such as Paunar and Ramtek in Maharashtra.

The hybridisation and incorporation of several styles was the hallmark of Chalukyan buildings. The most elaborate of all Chalukyan temples at Pattadakal made in the reign of Vikramaditya II (733-44) by his chief queen Loka Mahadevi is Virupaksha temple. Another important temple from this site is Papnath temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva. The temple is one of the best early examples of the *Dravida* tradition. By contrast other eastern Chalukyan Temples, like the Mahakuta, five kilometres from Badami, and the Swarga Brahma temple at Alampur show a greater assimilation of northern styles from Odisha and Rajasthan. At the same time the Durga temple at Aihole is unique having an even earlier style of an apsidal shrine which is reminiscent of Buddhist *chaitya* halls and is surrounded by a veranda of a later kind, with a *shikhara* that is stylistically like a *nagara* one. Finally, mention must be made of the Lad Khan temple at Aihole in Karnataka. This seems to be inspired by the wooden-roofed temples of the hills, except that it is constructed out of stone.

Somnathpuram temple

How then shall we understand these different styles at one place? As curiosities or as innovations? Undoubtedly, they are dynamic expressions of a creative set of architects who were competing with their peers in the rest of India. Whatever one's explanation is, these buildings remain of great art-historical interest.

With the waning of Chola and Pandya power, the Hoysalas of Karnataka grew to prominence in South India and became the most important patrons centred at Mysore. The remains of around hundred temples have been found in southern Deccan, though it is only three of them that are most frequently discussed: the temples at Belur, Halebid and Somnathpuram. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of these temples is that they grow extremely complex with so many projecting angles emerging from the previously straightforward square temple, that the plan of these temples starts looking like a star, and is thus known as a stellate-plan. Since they are made out of soapstone which is a relatively soft stone, the artists were able to carve their sculptures intricately. This can be seen particularly in the jewellery of the gods that adorn their temple walls.

The Hoysaleshvara temple (Lord of the Hoysalas) at Halebid in Karnataka was built in dark schist stone by the Hoysala king in 1150. Hoysala temples are sometimes called hybrid or *vesara* as their unique style seems neither completely *dravida* nor *nagara*, but somewhere in between. They are easily distinguishable from other medieval temples by their highly original star-like ground-plans and a profusion of decorative carvings.

Nataraja, Halebid

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Dedicated to Shiva as Nataraja, the Halebid temple is a double building with a large hall for the *mandapa* to facilitate music and dance. A Nandi pavilion precedes each building. The tower of the temple here and at nearby Belur fell long ago, and an idea of the temples' appearance can now only be gleaned from their detailed miniature versions flanking the entrances. From the central square plan cut-out angular projections create the star effect decorated with the most profuse carvings of animals and deities. So intricate is the carving that it is said, for instance, in the bottom-most frieze featuring a continuous procession of hundreds of elephants with their mahouts, no two elephants are in the same pose.

Founded in 1336, Vijayanagara, literally 'city of victory', attracted a number of international travellers such as the Italian, Niccolo di Conti, the Portuguese Domingo Paes, Fernao Nuniz and Duarte Barbosa and the Afghan Abd al-Razzaq, who have left vivid accounts of the city. In addition, various Sanskrit and Telugu works document the vibrant literary tradition of this kingdom. Architecturally, Vijayanagara synthesises the centuries-old *dravida* temple architecture with Islamic styles demonstrated by the neighbouring sultanates. Their sculpture too, although fundamentally derived from, and consciously seeking to recreate Chola ideals, occasionally shows the presence of foreigners. Their eclectic ruins from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries preserve a fascinating time in history, an age of wealth, exploration and cultural fusion.

BUDDHIST AND JAIN ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

So far, although we have focused on the nature of developments in Hindu architecture from the fifth to fourteenth centuries, it must constantly be kept in mind that this was also the very period when Buddhist and Jain developments were equally vibrant, and often went hand-in-glove with Hindu ones. Sites such as Ellora have Buddhist, Hindu and Jain monuments; however, Badami, Khajuraho and Kannauj have the remains of any two of the religions right next to each other.

When the Gupta empire crumbled in the sixth century CE, this eastern region of Bihar and Bengal, historically known as Magadha, appears to have remained unified whilst numerous small Rajput principalities sprang up to the west. In the eighth century, the Palas came to power in the region. The second Pala ruler, Dharmapala, became immensely powerful and established an empire by defeating

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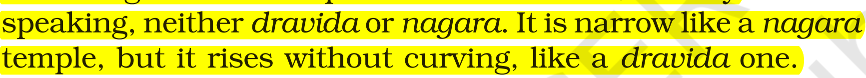
the powerful Rajput Pratiharas. Dharmapala consolidated an empire whose wealth lay in a combination of agriculture along the fertile Ganges plain and international trade.

The pre-eminent Buddhist site is, of course, Bodhgaya. Bodhgaya is a pilgrimage site since Siddhartha achieved enlightenment here and became Gautama Buddha. While the *bodhi* tree is of immense importance, the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya is an important reminder of the brickwork of that time. The first shrine here, located at the base of the Bodhi tree, is said to have been constructed by King Ashoka; the *vedika* around it is said to be post-Mauryan, of about 100 BCE; many of the sculptures in the niches in the temple are dated to the eighth century Pala Period, while the actual Mahabodhi temple itself as it stands now is largely a Colonial Period reconstruction of the old seventh century design. The design of the temple is unusual. It is, strictly speaking, neither *dravida* or *nagara*. It is narrow like a *nagara* temple, but it rises without curving, like a *dravida* one.



Mahabodhi temple, Bodhgaya

Nalanda University

The monastic university of Nalanda is a *mahavihara* as it is a complex of several monastries of various sizes. Till date, only a small portion of this ancient learning centre has been excavated as most of it lies buried under contemporary civilisation, making further excavations almost impossible.

Most of the information about Nalanda is based on the records of Xuan Zang—previously spelt as 'Hsuan-tsang'—which states that the foundation of a monastery was laid by Kumargupta I in the fifth century CE; and this was carried forward by the later monarchs who built up a fantastic university here. There is evidence that all three Buddhist doctrines— Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana—were taught here and monks made their way to Nalanda and its neighbouring sites of Bodhgaya and Kurkihar from China, Tibet and Central Asia in the north, and Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and various other countries from the south-eastern parts of Asia. Monks and pilgrims would take back small sculptures and illustrated manuscripts from here to their own countries. Buddhist monasteries like Nalanda, thus, were prolific centres of art production that had a decisive impact on the arts of all Buddhist countries in Asia.

The sculptural art of Nalanda, in stucco, stone and bronze, developed out of a heavy dependence on the Buddhist Gupta art of Sarnath. By the ninth century a synthesis occurred between the Sarnath Gupta idiom, the local Bihar tradition, and that of central India, leading to the formation of the Nalanda school of sculpture characterised by distinctive facial features, body forms and treatment of clothing and jewellery. The characteristic features of Nalanda art, distinguished by its consistently high quality of workmanship, are that the precisely executed sculptures have an ordered appearance with little effect of crowding. Sculptures are also usually not flat in relief but are depicted in three-dimensional forms. The back slabs of the sculptures are detailed and the ornamentations delicate. The Nalanda bronzes, dating between the seventh and eighth centuries to approximately the twelfth century outnumber the discovery of metal images from all other sites of eastern India and constitute a large body of Pala Period metal sculptures. Like their stone counterparts, the bronzes initially relied heavily on Sarnath and Mathura Gupta traditions. The Nalanda sculptures initially depict Buddhist deities of the Mahayana pantheon such as standing Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* such as Manjusri Kumara, Avalokiteshvara seated on a lotus and Naga-Nagarjuna. During the late eleventh and twelveth

Sculptural details, Nalanda

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Excavated site, Nalanda

centuries, when Nalanda emerged as an important tantric centre, the repertoire came to be dominated by Vajrayana deities such as Vajrasharada (a form of Saraswati) Khasarpana, Avalokiteshvara, etc. Depictions of crowned Buddhas occur commonly only after the tenth century. Interestingly, various brahmanical images not conforming to the Sarnath style have also been found at Nalanda, many of which are still worshipped in small temples in villages around the site.

Sirpur in Chhattisgarh is an early-Odisha style site belonging to the period between 550 and 800, with both Hindu and Buddhist shrines. In many ways the iconographic and stylistic elements of the Buddhist sculptures here are similar to that of Nalanda. Later other

Lakshmana temple, Sirpur

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Lord Bahubali, Gomateshwara, Karnataka

major Buddhist monasteries developed in Odisha. Lalitagiri, Vajragiri and Ratnagiri are the most famous of them.

The port-town of Nagapattinam was also a major Buddhist centre right until the Chola Period. One of the reasons for this must have been its importance in trade with Sri Lanka where large numbers of Buddhists still live. Bronze and stone sculptures in Chola style have come to light at Nagapattinam and generally date back to the tenth century.

Jains were prolific temple builders like the Hindus, and their sacred shrines and pilgrimage spots are to be found across the length and breadth of India except in the hills. The oldest Jain pilgrimage sites are to be found in Bihar. Many of these sites are famous for early Buddhist shrines. In the Deccan, some of the most architecturally important Jain sites can be found in Ellora and Aihole. In central India, Deogarh, Khajuraho, Chanderi and Gwalior have some excellent examples of Jain temples. Karnataka

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has a rich heritage of Jain shrines and at Sravana Belagola the famous statue of Gomateshwara, the granite statue of Lord Bahubali which stands eighteen metres or fifty-seven feet high, is the world's tallest monolithic free-standing structure. It was commissioned by Camundaraya, the General-in-Chief and Prime Minister of the Ganga Kings of Mysore.

Jain sculpture, Mount Abu

The Jain temples at Mount Abu were constructed by Vimal Shah. Notable for a simplistic exterior in contrast with the exuberant marble interiors, their rich sculptural decoration with deep undercutting creates a lace-like appearance. The temple is famous for its unique patterns on every ceiling, and the graceful bracket figures along the domed ceilings. The great Jain pilgrimage site in the Shatrunjay hills near Palitana in Kathiawar, Gujarat, is imposing with scores of temples clustered together.

In this chapter we have read about the prolific sculptural and architectural remains in different types of stone, terracotta and bronze from the fifth to the fourteenth centuries. Undoubtedly there would have been sculptures made of other media like silver and gold, but these would have been melted down and reused. Many sculptures would also have been made of wood and ivory, but these have perished because of their fragility. Often sculptures would have been painted, but again, pigments cannot always survive hundreds of years, especially if the sculptures were exposed to the elements. There was also a rich tradition of painting at this time, but the only examples that survive from this period are murals in a few religious buildings.

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Dilwara temple, Mount Abu

MAHABALIPURAM

Mahabalipuram is an important coastal town from the period of the Pallavas. It is dotted with several important rock-cut and free-standing structural temples mostly made in the seventh and eighth centuries. This large sculptural panel, one of the largest and oldest known in the world, is nearly thirty metres long and fifteen metres high. There is a natural cleft in the rock which has been cleverly used by its sculptors as a channel for water to flow down. This water collects in a massive tank in front of the sculpted wall.

Scholars have interpreted the story depicted on the panel differently. While some believe that it is the story of the descent of the Ganga from heaven to earth, others believe that the main story is of *Kiratarjuniya* or Arjuna's penance, a poetic work by Bharvi which is known to have been popular in the Pallava court. Other scholars have interpreted the symbolism behind the sculptures to show that the whole tableau was created to be a *prashasti*, or something to praise the Pallava king, who, they say, would have sat enthroned in the tank in front of this extraordinary backdrop.

A temple has been given prominence in the relief. Ascetics and worshippers sit before it. Above it is an emaciated bearded figure standing in penance on one leg, his arms raised above his head. He has been identified by some as Bhagirath and by others as Arjuna. Arjuna's penance was to obtain the *pashupata* weapon from Shiva, whereas Bhagirath prayed to have Ganga brought to earth. Next to this figure stands Shiva who has one hand in the boon bestowing gesture or *varada mudra*. The small *gana* or dwarf who stands below this hand may be a personification of the powerful *pashupata* weapon.

All the figures are shown with a slender and linear quality in an animated state of movement. Apart from humans and flying celestials there are several naturalistically carved birds and animals as well. Particularly noteworthy are the extraordinarily well-modelled, and life-like elephants, and the pair of deer who are under the shrine. The most humorous, however, is a cat who has been shown standing on his hind legs, with his hands raised, imitating Bhagirath or Arjuna. Close examination, however, reveals that this cat is, in fact, a symbolic device. He is surrounded by rats, which are unable to disturb him from his penance. Perhaps this is a metaphor used by the artist to show how strong Arjuna's or Bhagirath's penance was, who is also standing still, undisturbed by his surroundings.

RAVANA SHAKING MOUNT KAILASHA

The theme of Ravana shaking Mount Kailasha has been depicted several times in the caves of Ellora. But the most noteworthy of all is the one depicted on the left wall of Kailashnath temple (Cave No. 16) at Ellora. The image is dated to the eighth century CE. It is a colossal sculpture and is considered as one of the masterpieces of Indian sculpture. It depicts the episode of Ravana shaking Mount Kailasha when Lord Shiva along with Parvati and others were on the mountain. The composition is divided into several tiers. The lower tier depicts Ravana, multi-faced and multi-armed shaking the mount with ease. The depth of carvings of the multiple hands brings out the effect of three-dimensional space. Ravana's body is angular pushing one leg inside. The hands are expanded on the sides of the inside chamber created by the image of Ravana. The upper half is divided into three frames. The centre occupied by the image of Shiva and Parvati. Parvati is shown moving close to Shiva scared by the commotion on the hill. Her stretched legs and slightly twisted body in the recessed space create a very dramatic effect of light and shade. The volume of sculpture is very pronounced; the attendant fiures are equally voluminous. The *gana* (dwarf) figures are shown in action, involved in their activities. The celestial beings above Shiva and Parvati witnessing the event are shown in frozen movement. Protrusion of volume and recession in the space are important landmarks in the images of the Ellora caves. Light and darkness has been exploited by creating the images in full round. Their torsos are slender with heaviness in its surface treatment, arms are slim in full round. Attendant figures on the two sides have angular frontality. Every image in the composition is beautifully interwoven structurally with each other.

Carvings on outer wall, Kailashnath temple, Ellora

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LAKSHMANA TEMPLE IN KHAJURAHO

The temples at Khajuraho are all made of sandstone. They were patronised by the Chandella dynasty. The Lakshmana temple represents the full-fledged, developed style of temple architecture during the time of the Chandellas. Its construction was completed by 954, the year as per the inscription found at the base of the temple, by Yashovarman, the seventh ruler of the Chandella dynasty. The temple plan is of a panchayana type. The temple is constructed on a heavy plinth. It consists of an *ardhamandapa* (porch), *mandapa* (porch), the *maha mandapa* (greater hall) and the *garbhagriha* with *vimana*. Each part has a separate roof rising backward. All the halls have projected porches on their walls but are not accessible to visitors. Their use is functional, mainly for light and ventilation. The outer walls of the *garbhagriha* and the outer and inner walls around the circumambulatory path are decorated with sculptures. The *shikhara* on the *garbhagriha* is tall. The Khajuraho temples are also known for their erotic sculptures. Many erotic sculptures are carved on the plinth wall. Some erotic sculptures are carved on the actual wall of the temple. Tier arrangements on the walls provide a very specific space for the placement of the images. The interior halls are also decorated profusely. The entrance to the *garbhagriha* is sculpted with heavy voluminous pillars and lintels carved with small images as part of the door decoration. An image of Chaturmukha Vishnu is in the *garbhagriha*. There are four shrines in each corner of the temple. There are images of Vishnu in three shrines and Surya in one, which can be identified by the central image on the lintel of the shrine-doors. Drapery and ornaments are given a lot of attention.

A large number of bronze scupltures have been found in the country which shall be discussed in the next chapter.

We have focussed on the dominant art styles and some of the most famous monuments from different parts of India in the medieval period. It is important to realise that the enormous artistic achievements that we have studied here would never have been possible if artists worked alone. These large projects would have brought architects, builders, sculptors and painters together.

Above all, by studying these artworks, we are able to learn much about the kind of society that made these objects. Through them we can surmise what their buildings were like, what types of clothes they wore and above all we can use the art material to reconstruct the history of their religions. These religions, as we have seen were many and diverse and constantly changing. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism each have a plethora of gods and goddesses, and this was the period when *bhakti* and *tantra* — two major developments, affected them. Temples also became a space for many other art forms, such as music and dance and, from the tenth century onwards, temples became large landowners as kings and feudal lords gave them land for their maintenance once and upkeep, and performed an administrative role as well.

Project Work

Find any temple or monastery in or around your town and note down its important features such as different artchitectural features, sculptural style, identification of images, dynastic affiliation and patronage.

EXERCISE

1. Mark out all the places discussed in this chapter on a map of India.
2. What are the commonalities and differences between North Indian and South Indian temples? Make a diagram to supplement your answer.
3. Bring out the stylistic differences of any two sculptural traditions (such as Pala, Chola, Pallava, Chandella, etc.) using either drawing, painting or clay-modelling. Supplement your project with a written assignment that explains the salient features of the two styles you have chosen.
4. Compare any two temple styles in India; supplement with a line drawing.
5. Trace the development in Buddhist art.

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The Gupta Empire

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Chapter-2

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KINGS, FARMERS AND TOWNS
EARLY STATES AND ECONOMIES
(*c.* 600 BCE-600 CE)

There were several developments in different parts of the subcontinent during the long span of 1,500 years following the end of the Harappan civilisation. This was also the period during which the *Rigveda* was composed by people living along the Indus and its tributaries. Agricultural settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent, including north India, the Deccan Plateau, and parts of Karnataka. Besides, there is evidence of pastoral populations in the Deccan and further south. 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. In many cases, the dead were buried with a rich range of iron tools and weapons.

Fig. 2.1
An inscription, Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh),
c. *second century* BCE

From *c.* sixth century BCE, there is evidence that there were other trends as well. Perhaps the most visible was the emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms. Underlying these political processes were other changes, evident in the ways in which agricultural production was organised. Simultaneously, new towns appeared almost throughout the subcontinent.

Historians attempt to understand these developments by drawing on a range of sources – inscriptions, texts, coins and visual material. As we will see, this is a complex process. You will also notice that these sources do not tell the entire story.

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1. PRINSEP AND PIYADASSI

Some of the most momentous developments in Indian epigraphy took place in the 1830s. This was when 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

Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions.

referred to the king as Asoka, one of the most famous rulers known from Buddhist texts.

This gave a new direction to investigations into early Indian political history as European and Indian scholars used inscriptions and texts composed in a variety of languages to reconstruct the lineages of major dynasties that had ruled the subcontinent. As a result, the broad contours of political history were in place by the early decades of the twentieth century.

Subsequently, scholars began to shift their focus to the *context* of political history, investigating whether there were connections between political changes and economic and social developments. It was soon realised that while there were links, these were not always simple or direct.

2. THE EARLIEST STATES

2.1 The sixteen *mahajanapadas*

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. Early Buddhist and Jaina texts (see also Chapter 4) mention, amongst other things, sixteen states known as *mahajanapadas*. Although the lists vary, some names such as Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara and Avanti occur frequently. Clearly, these were amongst the most important *mahajanapadas*.

While most *mahajanapadas* were ruled by kings, some, known as *ganas* or *sanghas*, were oligarchies (p. 30), where power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called *rajas*. Both Mahavira and the Buddha (Chapter 4) belonged to such *ganas*. In some instances, as in the case of the Vajji *sangha*, the *rajas* probably controlled resources such as land collectively. Although their histories are often difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of sources, some of these states lasted for nearly a thousand years.

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. From *c.* sixth

Inscriptions

Inscriptions are writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone, metal or pottery. They usually record the achievements, activities or ideas of those who commissioned them and include the exploits of kings, or donations made by women and men to religious institutions. Inscriptions are virtually permanent records, some of which carry dates. Others are dated on the basis of *palaeography* or styles of writing, with a fair amount of precision. For instance, in *c.* 250 BCE the letter "a" was written like this: 𑀅 . By *c.* 500 CE, it was written like this: [illegible].

The earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit, a name for languages used by ordinary people. Names of rulers such as Ajatasattu and Asoka, known from Prakrit texts and inscriptions, have been spelt in their Prakrit forms in this chapter. You will also find terms in languages such as Pali, Tamil and Sanskrit, which too were used to write inscriptions and texts. It is possible that people spoke in other languages as well, even though these were not used for writing.

Janapada means the land where a *jana* (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles. It is a word used in both Prakrit and Sanskrit.

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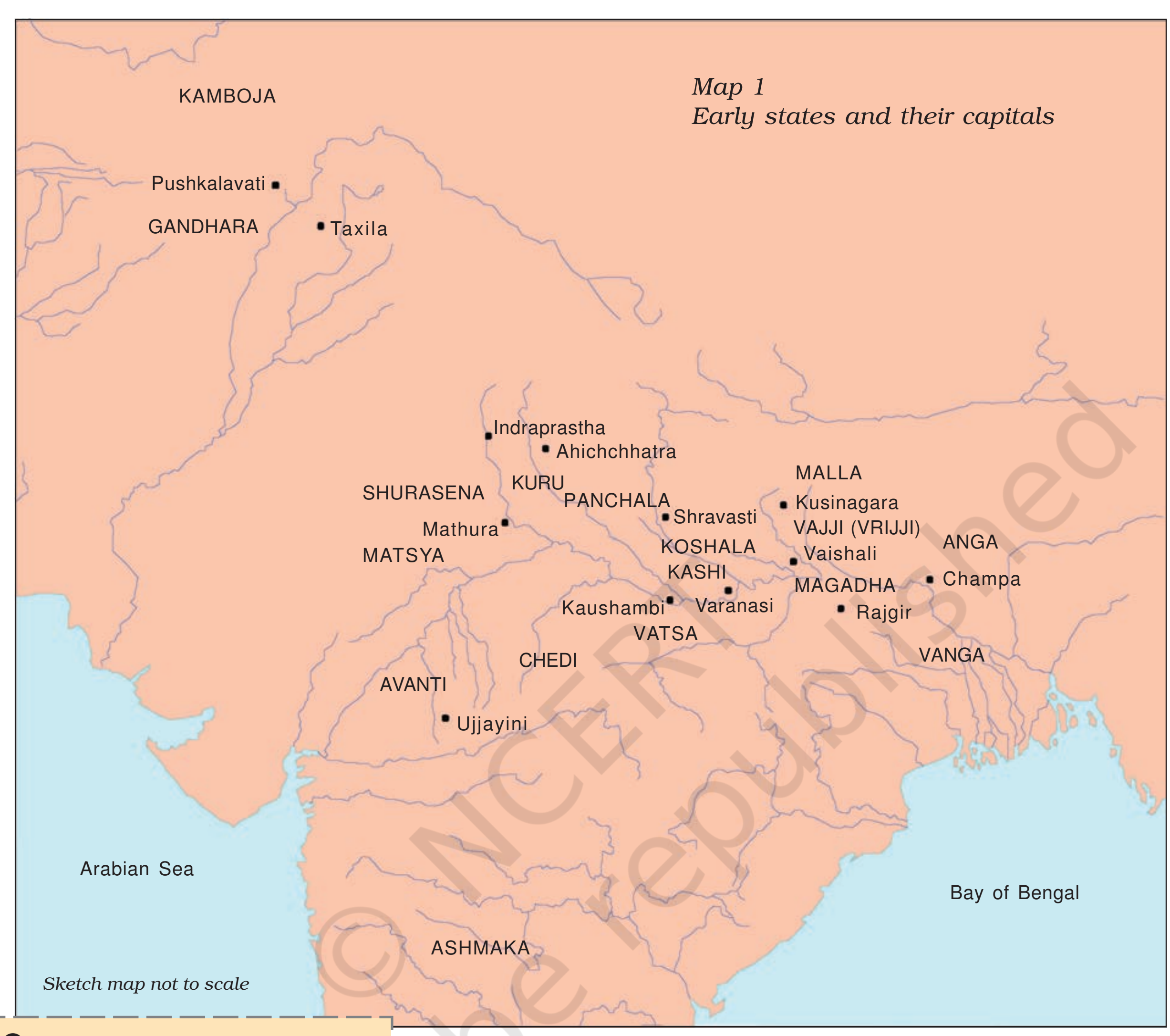

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➲ Which were the areas where states and cities were most densely clustered?

Oligarchy refers to a form of government where power is exercised by a group of men. The Roman Republic, about which you read last year, was an oligarchy in spite of its name.

century BCE onwards, Brahmanas began composing Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras. These laid down norms for rulers (as well as for other social categories), who were ideally expected to be Kshatriyas (see also Chapter 3). Rulers were advised to collect taxes and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans. Were resources also procured from pastoralists and forest peoples? We do not really know. What we do know is that raids on neighbouring states were recognised as a legitimate means of acquiring wealth. Gradually, some states acquired standing armies and maintained regular bureaucracies. Others continued to depend on militia, recruited, more often than not, from the peasantry.

2.2 First amongst the sixteen: Magadha

Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, Magadha (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful *mahajanapada*. Modern historians explain this development in a variety of ways: Magadha was a region where agriculture was especially productive. Besides, iron mines (in present-day Jharkhand) were accessible and provided resources for tools and weapons. Elephants, an important component of the army, were found in forests in the region. Also, the Ganga and its tributaries provided a means of cheap and convenient communication. However, 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.

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

➲ Discuss...

What are the different explanations offered by early writers and present-day historians for the growth of Magadhan power?

Fig. 2.2
Fortification walls at Rajgir

➲ Why were these walls built?

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Languages and scripts

Most Asokan inscriptions were in the Prakrit language while those in the northwest of the subcontinet were in Aramaic and Greek. Most Prakrit inscriptions were written in the Brahmi script; however, some, in the northwest, were written in Kharosthi. The Aramaic and Greek scripts were used for inscriptions in Afghanistan.

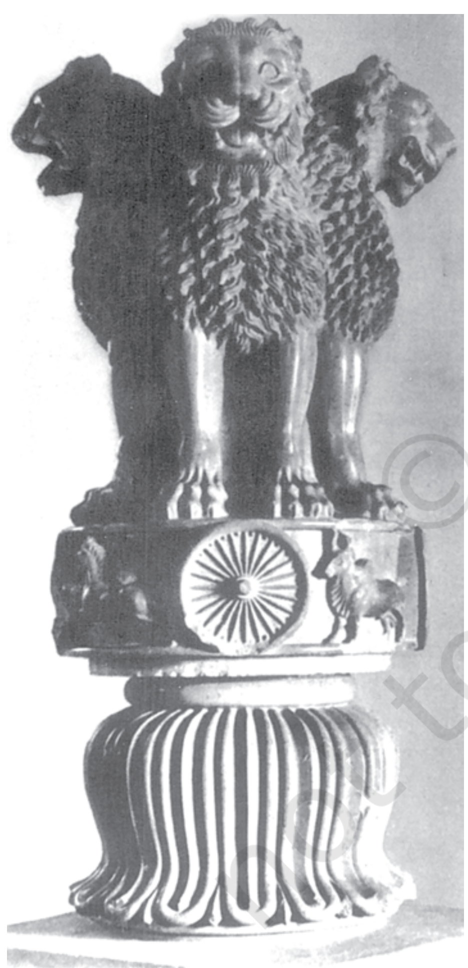

Fig. 2.3
The lion capital

➲ Why is the lion capital considered important today?

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).

3.1 Finding out about the Mauryas

Historians have used a variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire. These include archaeological finds, especially sculpture. Also valuable are 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. Besides, the Mauryas are mentioned in later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature, as well as in Sanskrit literary works. While these are useful, the inscriptions of Asoka (*c.* 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.

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.

3.2 Administering the 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. If we examine the content of these inscriptions, we find virtually the same message engraved everywhere – from the present-day North West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan, to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Uttarakhand in India. Could this vast empire have had a uniform administrative system? Historians have increasingly come to realise that

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➲ Could rulers have engraved inscriptions in areas that were not included within their empire?

this is unlikely. The regions included within the empire were just too diverse. Imagine the contrast between the hilly terrain of Afghanistan and the coast of Orissa.

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.

Source 1

What the king's officials did

Here is an excerpt from the account of Megasthenes:

> Of the great officers of state, some ... superintend the rivers, measure the land, as is done in Egypt, and inspect the sluices by which water is let out from the main canals into their branches, so that every one may have an equal supply of it. The same persons have charge also of the huntsmen, and are entrusted with the power of rewarding or punishing them according to their deserts. They collect the taxes, and superintend the occupations connected with land; as those of the woodcutters, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the miners.

➲ Why were officials appointed to supervise these occupational groups?

➲ **Discuss...**

Read the excerpts from Megasthenes and the *Arthashastra* (Sources 1 and 2). To what extent do you think these texts are useful in reconstructing a history of Mauryan administration?

Communication along both land and riverine routes was vital for the existence of the empire. Journeys from the centre to the provinces could have taken weeks if not months. This meant arranging for provisions as well as protection for those who were on the move. It is obvious that the army was an important means for ensuring the latter. Megasthenes mentions a committee with six subcommittees for coordinating military activity. Of these, one looked after the navy, the second managed transport and provisions, the third was responsible for foot-soldiers, the fourth for horses, the fifth for chariots and the sixth for elephants. The activities of the second subcommittee were rather varied: arranging for bullock carts to carry equipment, procuring food for soldiers and fodder for animals, and recruiting servants and artisans to look after the soldiers.

Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating *dhamma*, the principles of which, as we have seen, were simple and virtually universally applicable. 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*.

3.3 How important was the empire?

When historians began reconstructing early Indian history in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the Mauryan Empire was regarded as a major landmark. India was then under colonial rule, and was part of the British empire. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian historians found the possibility that there was an empire in early India both challenging and exciting. Also, 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 and industrious, as also more humble than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles. So it is not surprising that nationalist leaders in the twentieth century regarded him as an inspiring figure.

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Yet, how important was the Mauryan Empire? It lasted for about 150 years, which is not a very long time in the vast span of the history of the subcontinent. Besides, if you look at Map 2, you will notice that the empire did not encompass the entire subcontinent. And even within the frontiers of the empire, control was not uniform. By the second century BCE, new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.

4. NEW NOTIONS OF KINGSHIP

4.1 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 (the name of the ancient Tamil country, which included parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, in addition to Tamil Nadu), proved to be stable and prosperous.

Chiefs and chiefdoms

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

We know about these states from a variety of sources. For instance, the early Tamil Sangam texts (see also Chapter 3) contain poems describing chiefs and the ways in which they acquired and distributed resources.

Many chiefs and kings, including the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western and central India (*c.* second century BCE-second century CE) and the Shakas, a people of Central Asian origin who established kingdoms in the north-western and western parts of the subcontinent, derived revenues from long-distance trade. Their social origins were often obscure, but, as we will see in the case of the Satavahanas (Chapter 3), once they acquired power they attempted to claim social status in a variety of ways.

Source 2

Capturing elephants for the army

The *Arthashastra* lays down minute details of administrative and military organisation. This is what it says about how to capture elephants:

> Guards of elephant forests, assisted by those who rear elephants, those who enchain the legs of elephants, those who guard the boundaries, those who live in forests, as well as by those who nurse elephants, shall, with the help of five or seven female elephants to help in tethering wild ones, trace the whereabouts of herds of elephants by following the course of urine and dung left by elephants.

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

➲ If the Greek accounts were true, what kinds of resources do you think the Mauryan ruler would have required to maintain such a large army?

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Source 3

The Pandya chief Senguttuvan visits the forest

This is an excerpt from the *Silappadikaram,* an epic written in Tamil:

(When he visited the forest) people came down the mountain, singing and dancing … just as the defeated show respect to the victorious king, so did they bring gifts – ivory, fragrant wood, fans made of the hair of deer, honey, sandalwood, red ochre, antimony, turmeric, cardamom, pepper, etc. ... they brought coconuts, mangoes, medicinal plants, fruits, onions, sugarcane, flowers, areca nut, bananas, baby tigers, lions, elephants, monkeys, bear, deer, musk deer, fox, peacocks, musk cat, wild cocks, speaking parrots, etc. …

➲ Why did people bring these gifts? What would the chief have used these for?

4.2 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. Their history has been reconstructed from inscriptions and textual traditions. The notions of kingship they wished to project are perhaps best evidenced in their coins and sculpture.

Colossal statues of Kushana rulers have been found installed in a shrine at Mat near Mathura (Uttar Pradesh). Similar statues have been found in a shrine in Afghanistan as well. Some historians feel this indicates that the Kushanas considered themselves godlike. Many Kushana rulers also adopted the title *devaputra*, or "son of god", possibly inspired by Chinese rulers who called themselves sons of heaven.

By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. Many of these depended on *samantas*, 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. While historians often attempt to draw factual information from such compositions, those who composed and read them often treasured them as works of poetry

Fig. 2.4
A Kushana coin
Obverse: King Kanishka
Reverse: A deity

➲ How has the king been portrayed?

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rather than as accounts that were literally true. 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), is a case in point.

Source 4

In praise of Samudragupta

This is an excerpt from the *Prayaga Prashasti:*

> He was without an antagonist on earth; he, by the overflowing of the multitude of (his) many good qualities adorned by hundreds of good actions, has wiped off the fame of other kings with the soles of (his) feet; (he is) *Purusha* (the Supreme Being), being the cause of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad (he is) incomprehensible; (he is) one whose tender heart can be captured only by devotion and humility; (he is) possessed of compassion; (he is) the giver of many hundred-thousands of cows; (his) mind has received ceremonial initiation for the uplift of the miserable, the poor, the forlorn and the suffering; (he is) resplendent and embodied kindness to mankind; (he is) equal to (the gods) Kubera (the god of wealth), Varuna (the god of the ocean), Indra (the god of rains) and Yama (the god of death)…

Fig. 2.5
Sandstone sculpture of a Kushana king

➲ What are the elements in the sculpture that suggest that this is an image of a king?

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➲ Discuss...

Why do you think kings claimed divine status?

Source 5

The Sudarshana (beautiful) lake in Gujarat

Find Girnar on Map 2. The Sudarshana lake was an artificial reservoir. We know about it from a rock inscription (*c.* second century CE) in Sanskrit, composed to record the achievements of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman.

The inscription mentions that the lake, with embankments and water channels, was built by a local governor during the rule of the Mauryas. However, a terrible storm broke the embankments and water gushed out of the lake. Rudradaman, who was then ruling in the area, claimed to have got the lake repaired using his own resources, without imposing any tax on his subjects.

Another inscription on the same rock (*c.* fifth century) mentions how one of the rulers of the Gupta dynasty got the lake repaired once again.

➲ Why did rulers make arrangements for irrigation?

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.

5. A Changing Countryside

5.1 Popular perceptions of kings

What did subjects think about their rulers? Obviously, inscriptions do not provide all the answers. In fact, ordinary people rarely left accounts of their thoughts and experiences. Nevertheless, historians have tried to solve this problem by examining stories contained in anthologies such as the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. 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.

One story known as the *Gandatindu Jataka* describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king; these included elderly women and men, cultivators, herders, village boys and even animals. 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, especially the rural population, could often be strained – kings frequently tried to fill their coffers by demanding high taxes, and peasants particularly found such demands oppressive. Escaping into the forest remained an option, as reflected in the *Jataka* story. Meanwhile, other strategies aimed at increasing production to meet growing demand for taxes also came to be adopted.

5.2 Strategies for increasing production

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

While the iron ploughshare led to a growth in agricultural productivity, its use was restricted to certain parts of the subcontinent – cultivators in

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

Another strategy adopted to increase agricultural production was the use of irrigation, through wells and tanks, and less commonly, canals. Communities as well as individuals organised the construction of irrigation works. The latter, usually powerful men including kings, often recorded such activities in inscriptions.

5.3 Differences in rural society

While these technologies often led to an increase in production, the benefits were very uneven. What is evident is that there was a growing differentiation amongst people engaged in agriculture – stories, especially within the Buddhist tradition, refer to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants, as well as large landholders. The term *gahapati* was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. The large landholders, as well as the village headman (whose position was often hereditary), emerged as powerful figures, and often exercised control over other cultivators. Early Tamil literature (the Sangam texts) also mentions different categories of people living in the villages – large landowners or *vellalar*, ploughmen or *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. In such a situation, questions of control over land must have become crucial, as these were often discussed in legal texts.

Gahapati

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

Source 6

The importance of boundaries

The *Manusmrti* is one of the best-known legal texts of early India, written in Sanskrit and compiled between *c.* second century BCE and *c.* second century CE. This is what the text advises the king to do:

> Seeing that in the world controversies constantly arise due to the ignorance of boundaries, he should … have … concealed boundary markers buried – stones, bones, cow's hair, chaff, ashes, potsherds, dried cow dung, bricks, coal, pebbles and sand. He should also have other similar substances that would not decay in the soil buried as hidden markers at the intersection of boundaries.

➲ Would these boundary markers have been adequate to resolve disputes?

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Source 7

Life in a small village

The *Harshacharita* is a biography of Harshavardhana, the ruler of Kanauj (see Map 3), composed in Sanskrit by his court poet, Banabhatta (*c.* seventh century CE). This is an excerpt from the text, an extremely rare representation of life in a settlement on the outskirts of a forest in the Vindhyas:

> The outskirts being for the most part forest, many parcels of rice-land, threshing ground and arable land were being apportioned by small farmers … it was mainly spade culture … owing to the difficulty of ploughing the sparsely scattered fields covered with grass, with their few clear spaces, their black soil stiff as black iron …
>
> There were people moving along with bundles of bark … countless sacks of plucked flowers, … loads of flax and hemp bundles, quantities of honey, peacocks' tail feathers, wreaths of wax, logs, and grass. Village wives hastened en route for neighbouring villages, all intent on thoughts of sale and bearing on their heads baskets filled with various gathered forest fruits.

➲ How would you classify the people described in the text in terms of their occupations?

5.4 Land grants and new rural elites

From the early centuries of the Common Era, we find grants of land being made, many of which were recorded in inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions were on stone, but most were on copper plates (Fig. 2.13) which were probably given as a record of the transaction to those who received the land. The records that have survived 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. Let us look at one such inscription more closely.

Prabhavati Gupta was the daughter of one of the most important rulers in early Indian history, Chandragupta II (*c.* 375-415 CE). She was married into another important ruling family, that of the Vakatakas, who were powerful in the Deccan (see Map 3). According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have independent access to resources such as land. However, the inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land, which she then granted. This may have been because she was a queen (one of the few known from early Indian history), and her situation was therefore exceptional. It is also possible that the provisions of legal texts were not uniformly implemented.

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

Land grants such as this one have been found in several parts of the country. There were regional variations in the sizes of land donated – ranging from small plots to vast stretches of uncultivated land – and the rights given to donees (the recipients of the grant). 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

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by making grants of land. They also feel that kings tried to project themselves as supermen (as we saw in the previous section) *because* they were losing control: they wanted to present at least a façade of power.

Source 8

Prabhavati Gupta and the village of Danguna

This is what Prabhavati Gupta states in her inscription:

Prabhavati Gupta … commands the *gramakutumbinas* (householders/peasants living in the village), Brahmanas and others living in the village of Danguna …

"Be it known to you that on the twelfth (lunar day) of the bright (fortnight) of Karttika, we have, in order to increase our religious merit donated this village with the pouring out of water, to the Acharya (teacher) Chanalasvamin … You should obey all (his) commands …

We confer on (him) the following exemptions typical of an *agrahara* …(this village is) not to be entered by soldiers and policemen; (it is) exempt from (the obligation to provide) grass, (animal) hides as seats, and charcoal (to touring royal officers); exempt from (the royal prerogative of) purchasing fermenting liquors and digging (salt); exempt from (the right to) mines and *khadira* trees; exempt from (the obligation to supply) flowers and milk; (it is donated) together with (the right to) hidden treasures and deposits (and) together with major and minor taxes …"

This charter has been written in the thirteenth (regnal) year. (It has been) engraved by Chakradasa.

➲ What were the things produced in the village?

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

Land grants provide some insight into the relationship between cultivators and the state. However, there were people who were often beyond the reach of officials or *samantas:* pastoralists, fisherfolk and hunter-gatherers, mobile or semi-sedentary artisans and shifting cultivators. Generally, such groups did not keep detailed records of their lives and transactions.

➲ Discuss...

Find out whether plough agriculture, irrigation and transplantation are prevalent in your state. If not, are there any alternative systems in use?

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The history of Pataliputra

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

6. Towns and Trade

6.1 New cities

Let us retrace our steps back to the urban centres that emerged in several parts of the subcontinent from *c.* sixth century BCE. As we have seen, many of these were capitals of *mahajanapadas*. 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, and yet others, such as Puhar, were near the coast, from where sea routes began. Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activity.

6.2 Urban populations: Elites and craftspersons

We have seen that kings and ruling elites lived in fortified cities. Although it is difficult to conduct extensive excavations at most sites because people live in these areas even today (unlike the Harappan cities), a wide range of artefacts have been recovered from them. 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.

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Fig. 2.6
The gift of an image
This is part of an image from Mathura. On the pedestal is a Prakrit inscription, mentioning that a woman named Nagapiya, the wife of a goldsmith (*sovanika*) named Dharmaka, installed this image in a shrine.

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➲ Were there any cities in the region where the Harappan civilisation flourished in the third millennium BCE?

By the second century BCE, we find short votive inscriptions in a number of cities. These mention the name of the donor, and sometimes specify his/her occupation as well. They tell us about people who lived in towns: washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants and kings.

Sometimes, guilds or *shrenis*, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well. These guilds probably 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.

Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions.

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Source 9

The Malabar coast (present-day Kerala)

Here is an excerpt from *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (*c.* first century CE):

> They (i.e. traders from abroad) send large ships to these market-towns on account of the great quantity and bulk of pepper and malabathrum (possibly cinnamon, produced in these regions). There are imported here, in the first place, a great quantity of coin; topaz … antimony (a mineral used as a colouring substance), coral, crude glass, copper, tin, lead … There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity in only one region near these markets … Besides this there are exported great quantities of fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, … transparent stones of all kinds, diamonds and sapphires, and tortoise shell.

Archaeological evidence of a bead-making industry, using precious and semi-precious stones, has been found in Kodumanal (Tamil Nadu). It is likely that local traders brought the stones mentioned in the *Periplus* from sites such as these to the coastal ports.

➲ Why did the author compile this list?

"Periplus" is a Greek word meaning sailing around and *"Erythraean"* was the Greek name for the Red Sea.

6.3 Trade in the subcontinent and beyond

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

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 *satthavahas* 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.

6.4 Coins and kings

To some extent, exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of coinage. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (*c.* sixth century BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used. These have been recovered from excavations at a number of sites throughout the subcontinent. Numismatists have studied these and other coins to reconstruct possible commercial networks.

Attempts made to identify the symbols on punch-marked coins with specific ruling dynasties, including the Mauryas, suggest that these were issued by kings. It is also likely that merchants, bankers and townspeople issued some of these coins. The first coins to bear the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks, who established control over the north-western part of the subcontinent *c.* second century BCE.

The kushanas, however, issued the largest hoards of gold coins first gold coins *c.* first century CE. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued

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by contemporary Roman emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran, and have been found from several sites in north India and Central Asia. The widespread use of gold coins indicates the enormous value of the transactions that were taking place. Besides, hoards of Roman coins have been found from archaeological sites in south India. It is obvious that networks of trade were not confined within political boundaries: south India was not part of the Roman Empire, but there were close connections through trade.

Coins were also issued by tribal republics such as that of the Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (*c.* first century CE). Archaeologists have unearthed several thousand copper coins issued by the Yaudheyas, pointing to the latter's interest and participation in economic exchanges.

Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. The earliest issues are remarkable for their purity. These coins facilitated long-distance transactions from which kings also benefited.

From *c.* sixth century CE onwards, finds of gold coins taper off. Does this indicate that there was some kind of an economic crisis? Historians are divided on this issue. Some suggest that with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire long-distance trade declined, 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 started emerging around this time. They also point out that though finds of coins of that time are fewer, coins continue to be mentioned in inscriptions and texts. Could it be that there are fewer finds because coins were in circulation rather than being hoarded?

Fig. 2.9
A Gupta coin

Numismatics is the study of coins, including visual elements such as scripts and images, metallurgical analysis and the contexts in which they have been found.

Fig. 2.7
A punch-marked coin, so named because symbols were punched or stamped onto the metal surface

Fig. 2.8
A Yaudheya coin

➲ Discuss...

What are the transactions involved in trade? Which of these transactions are apparent from the sources mentioned? Are there any that are not evident from the sources?

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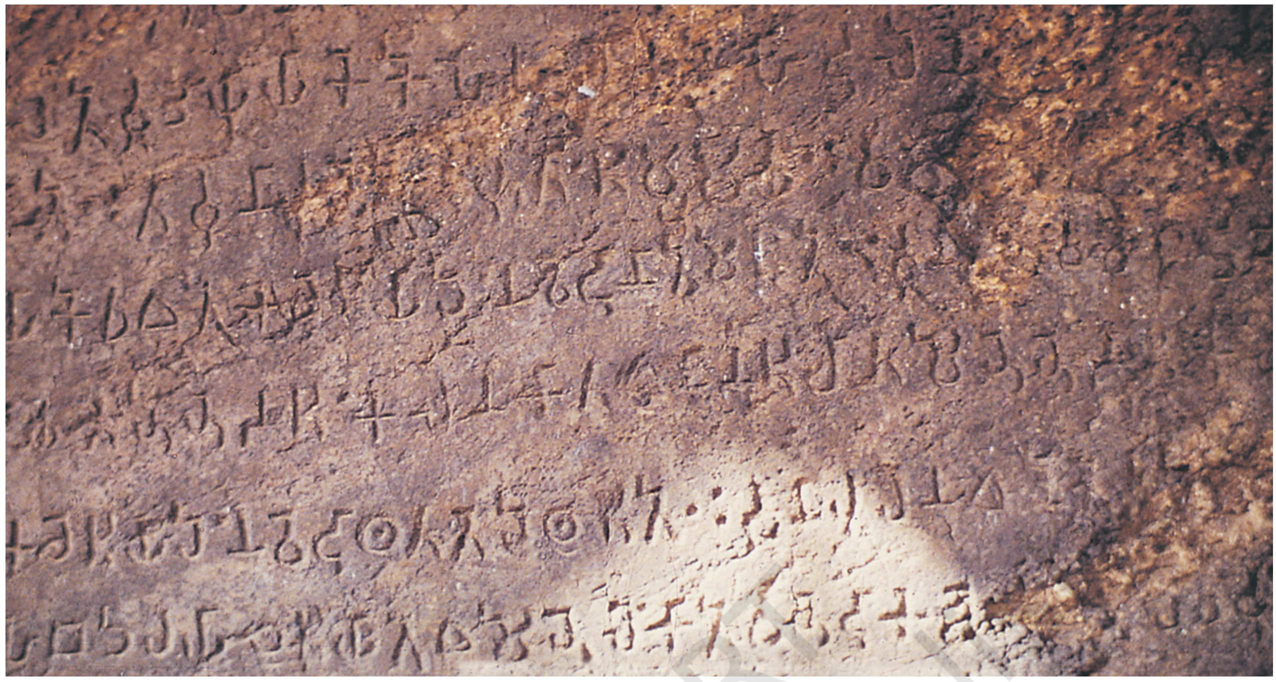

Fig. 2.10
An Asokan inscription

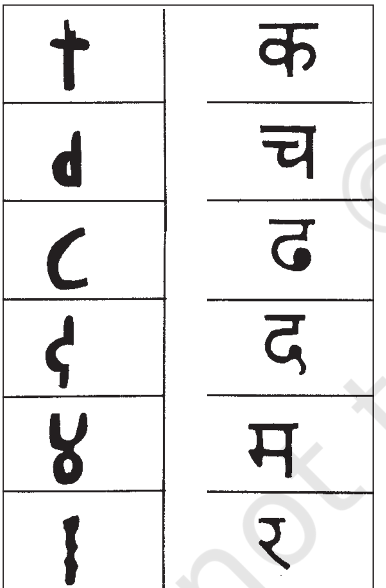

Fig. 2.11
Asokan Brahmi with Devanagari equivalents

➲ Do some Devanagari letters appear similar to Brahmi? Are there any that seem different?

7. Back to Basics
How Are Inscriptions Deciphered?

So far, we have been studying excerpts from inscriptions amongst other things. But how do historians find out what is written on them?

7.1 Deciphering Brahmi

Most scripts used to write modern Indian languages are derived from Brahmi, the script used in most Asokan inscriptions. From the late eighteenth century, European scholars aided by Indian pandits worked backwards from contemporary Bengali and Devanagari (the script used to write Hindi) manuscripts, comparing their letters with older specimens.

Scholars who studied early inscriptions sometimes assumed these were in Sanskrit, although the earliest inscriptions were, in fact, in Prakrit. It was only after decades of painstaking investigations by several epigraphists that James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.

7.2 How Kharosthi was read

The story of the decipherment of Kharosthi, the script used in inscriptions in the northwest, is different. Here, finds of coins of Indo-Greek kings who ruled over the area (*c.* second-first centuries BCE) have

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facilitated matters. These coins contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. European scholars who could read the former compared the letters. For instance, the symbol for "a" could be found in both scripts for writing names such as Apollodotus. With Prinsep identifying the language of the Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit, it became possible to read longer inscriptions as well.

7.3 Historical evidence from inscriptions

To find out how epigraphists and historians work, let us look at two Asokan inscriptions more closely.

Note that the name of the ruler, Asoka, is not mentioned in the inscription (Source 10). What is used instead are titles adopted by the ruler – *devanampiya*, often translated as "beloved of the gods" and *piyadassi*, or "pleasant to behold". The name Asoka is mentioned in some other inscriptions, which also contain these titles. After examining all these inscriptions, and finding that they match in terms of content, style, language and palaeography, epigraphists have concluded that they were issued by the same ruler.

You may also have noticed that Asoka claims that earlier rulers had no arrangements to receive reports. If you consider the political history of the subcontinent prior to Asoka, do you think this statement is true? Historians have to constantly assess statements made in inscriptions to judge whether they are true, plausible or exaggerations.

Did you notice that there are words within brackets? Epigraphists sometimes add these to make the meaning of sentences clear. This has to be done carefully, to ensure that the intended meaning of the author is not changed.

Source 10

The orders of the king

Thus speaks king Devanampiya Piyadassi:

> In the past, there were no arrangements for disposing affairs, nor for receiving regular reports. But I have made the following (arrangement). *Pativedakas* should report to me about the affairs of the people at all times, anywhere, whether I am eating, in the inner apartment, in the bedroom, in the cow pen, being carried (possibly in a palanquin), or in the garden. And I will dispose of the affairs of the people everywhere.

➲ Epigraphists have translated the term *pativedaka* as reporter. In what ways would the functions of the *pativedaka* have been different from those we generally associate with reporters today?

Fig. 2.12
A coin of the Indo-Greek king Menander

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Source 11

The anguish of the king

When the king Devanampiya Piyadassi had been ruling for eight years, the (country of the) Kalingas (present-day coastal Orissa) was conquered by (him).

One hundred and fifty thousand men were deported, a hundred thousand were killed, and many more died.

After that, now that (the country of) the Kalingas has been taken, Devanampiya (is devoted) to an intense study of Dhamma, to the love of Dhamma, and to instructing (the people) in Dhamma.

This is the repentance of Devanampiya on account of his conquest of the (country of the) Kalingas.

For this is considered very painful and deplorable by Devanampiya that, while one is conquering an unconquered (country) slaughter, death and deportation of people (take place) there ...

➲ **Discuss...**

Look at Map 2 and discuss the location of Asokan inscriptions. Do you notice any patterns?

Historians have to make other assessments as well. If a king's orders were inscribed on natural rocks near cities or important routes of communication, would passers-by have stopped to read these? Most people were probably not literate. Did everybody throughout the subcontinent understand the Prakrit used in Pataliputra? Would the orders of the king have been followed? Answers to such questions are not always easy to find.

Some of these problems are evident if we look at an Asokan inscription (Source 11), which has often been interpreted as reflecting the anguish of the ruler, as well as marking a change in his attitude towards warfare. As we shall see, the situation becomes more complex once we move beyond reading the inscription at face value.

While Asokan inscriptions have been found in present-day Orissa, the one depicting his anguish is missing. In other words, the inscription has not been found in the region that was conquered. What are we to make of that? Is it that the anguish of the recent conquest was too painful in the region, and therefore the ruler was unable to address the issue?

8. The Limitations of Inscriptional Evidence

By now it is probably evident that there are limits to what epigraphy can reveal. Sometimes, there are technical limitations: letters are very faintly engraved, and thus reconstructions are uncertain. Also, inscriptions may be damaged or letters missing. Besides, it is not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time. If you go through an epigraphical journal (some are listed in Timeline 2), you will realise that scholars are constantly debating and discussing alternative ways of reading inscriptions.

Although several thousand inscriptions have been discovered, not all have been deciphered, published and translated. Besides, many more inscriptions must have existed, which have not survived the ravages of time. So what is available at present is probably only a fraction of what was inscribed.

There is another, perhaps more fundamental, problem: not everything that we may consider

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politically or economically significant was necessarily recorded in inscriptions. For instance, routine agricultural practices and the joys and sorrows of daily existence find no mention in inscriptions, which focus, more often than not, on grand, unique events. Besides, the content of inscriptions almost invariably projects the perspective of the person(s) who commissioned them. As such, they need to be juxtaposed with other perspectives so as to arrive at a better understanding of the past.

Thus epigraphy alone does not provide a full understanding of political and economic history. Also, historians often question both old and new evidence. Scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily interested in the histories of kings. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, issues such as economic change, and the ways in which different social groups emerged have assumed far more importance. Recent decades have seen a much greater preoccupation with histories of marginalised groups. This will probably lead to fresh investigations of old sources, and the development of new strategies of analysis.

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Fig. 2.13
A copperplate inscription from Karnataka, c. sixth century CE

TIMELINE 1
MAJOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

*c.*600-500 BCE	Paddy transplantation; urbanisation in the Ganga valley; *mahajanapadas*; punch-marked coins
c. 500-400 BCE	Rulers of Magadha consolidate power
c. 327-325 BCE	Invasion of Alexander of Macedon
c. 321 BCE	Accession of Chandragupta Maurya
c. 272/268-231 BCE	Reign of Asoka
c. 185 BCE	End of the Mauryan empire
c. 200-100 BCE	Indo-Greek rule in the northwest; Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in south India; Satavahanas in the Deccan
c. 100 BCE-200 CE	Shaka (peoples from Central Asia) rulers in the northwest; Roman trade; gold coinage
c. 78 CE?	Accession of Kanishka
*c.*100-200 CE	Earliest inscriptional evidence of land grants by Satavahana and Shaka rulers
c. 320 CE	Beginning of Gupta rule
c. 335-375 CE	Samudragupta
c. 375-415 CE	Chandragupta II; Vakatakas in the Deccan
c. 500-600 CE	Rise of the Chalukyas in Karnataka and of the Pallavas in Tamil Nadu
c. 606-647 CE	Harshavardhana king of Kanauj; Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang comes in search of Buddhist texts
c. 712	Arabs conquer Sind

(Note: It is difficult to date economic developments precisely. Also, there are enormous subcontinental variations which have not been indicated in the timeline.
Only the earliest dates for specific developments have been given. The date of Kanishka's accession is not certain and this has been marked with a '?')

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TIMELINE 2
MAJOR ADVANCES IN EPIGRAPHY

Eighteenth century	
1784	Founding of the Asiatic Society (Bengal)
Nineteenth century	
1810s	Colin Mackenzie collects over 8,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian languages
1838	Decipherment of Asokan Brahmi by James Prinsep
1877	Alexander Cunningham publishes a set of Asokan inscriptions
1886	First issue of *Epigraphia Carnatica*, a journal of south Indian inscriptions
1888	First issue of *Epigraphia Indica*
Twentieth century	
1965-66	D.C. Sircar publishes *Indian Epigraphy* and *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*

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ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Discuss the evidence of craft production in Early Historic cities. In what ways is this different from the evidence from Harappan cities?
2. Describe the salient features of *mahajanapadas.*
3. How do historians reconstruct the lives of ordinary people?
4. Compare and contrast the list of things given to the Pandyan chief (Source 3) with those produced in the village of Danguna (Source 8). Do you notice any similarities or differences?
5. List some of the problems faced by epigraphists.

Write a short essay (about 500 words) on the following:

6. Discuss the main features of Mauryan administration. Which of these elements are evident in the Asokan inscriptions that you have studied?

7. This is a statement made by one of the best-known epigraphists of the twentieth century, D.C. Sircar: "There is no aspect of life, culture and activities of the Indians that is not reflected in inscriptions." Discuss.

8. Discuss the notions of kingship that developed in the post-Mauryan period.

9. To what extent were agricultural practices transformed in the period under consideration?

Map work

10. Compare Maps 1 and 2, and list the *mahajanapadas* that might have been included in the Mauryan Empire. Are any Asokan inscriptions found in these areas?

Project (any one)

11. Collect newspapers for one month. Cut and paste all the statements made by government officials about public works. Note what the reports say about the resources required for such projects, how the resources are mobilised and the objective of the project. Who issues these statements, and how and why are they communicated? Compare and contrast these with the evidence from inscriptions discussed in this chapter. What are the similarities and differences that you notice?

12. Collect five different kinds of currency notes and coins in circulation today. For each one of these, describe what you see on the obverse and the reverse (the front and the back). Prepare a report on the common features as well as the differences in terms of pictures, scripts and languages, size, shape and any other element that you find significant. Compare these with the coins shown in this chapter, discussing the materials used, the techniques of minting, the visual symbols and their significance and the possible functions that coins may have had.

If you would like to know more, read:

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Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi.

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Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

For more information, you could visit:
http:/projectsouthasia.sdstate.edu/Docs/index.html

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