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Sheelam Param Bhushanam

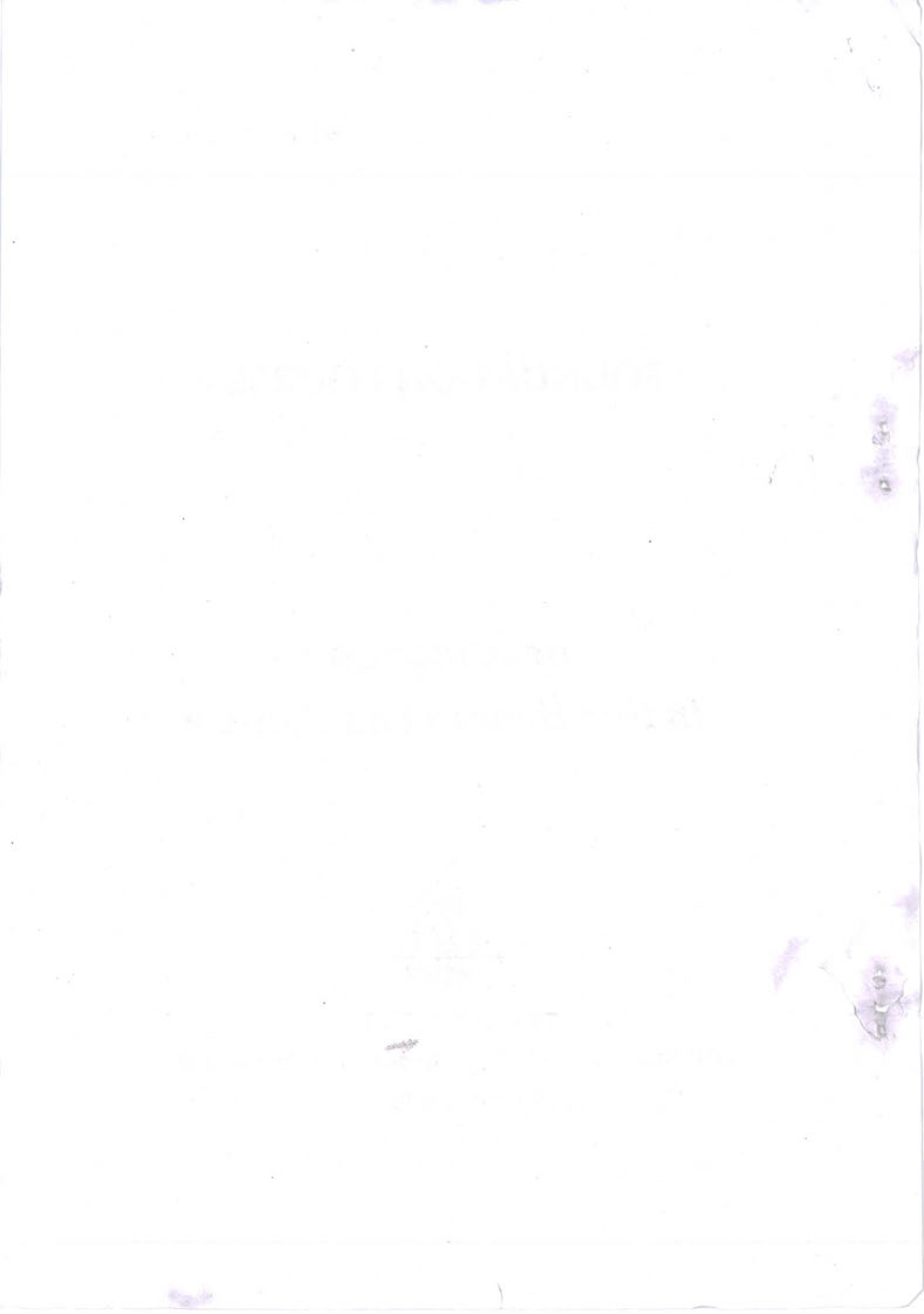
FOUNDATION COURSE

Readings on Indian History and Culture

Government of India

Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration

Mussoorie- 248179



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History and the Enterprise of knowledge[1]

-By Amartya Sen

In an often-quoted remark, Henry Ford, the great captain of industry, said, "History is more or less bunk." As a general statement about history, this is perhaps not an assessment of compelling delicacy. And yet Henry Ford would have been right to think, if that is what he meant, that history could easily become "bunk" through motivated manipulation.

This is especially so if the writing of history is manoeuvred to suit a slanted agenda in contemporary politics. There are organized attempts in India, at this time, to do just that, with arbitrary augmentation of a narrowly sectarian view of India's past, along with undermining its magnificently multi-religious and heterodox history. Among other distortion, there is also a systematic confounding here of mythology with history. An extraordinary example of this has been the interpretation of the Ramayana, not as a great epic, but as documentary history, which can be invoked to establish property rights over places and sites possessed and owned by others. We see this for example in the confusing story of a recent statement by a director of the Indian council of Historical Research (ICHR) announcing exact knowledge of where Rama, the avatar, was born (not surprisingly precisely where the Babri masjid mosque stood—from which the property rights for building a temple exactly there is meant to follow),combined with the assertion that the masjid itself had no religious significance (followed by an embarrassed dissociation of the ICHR itself from these remarkable pronouncement), thus illustrating the confounding of myth and history. The Ramayana ,which Rabindra Nath Tagore had seen as a wonderful legend ("the story of the Ramayana " is to be interpreted ,as Tagore put it in a vision of India's history ,not as "a matter of historical fact" but in the plane of ideas") and in fact as a marvelous parable of "reconciliation", is now made into a legally authentic account that gives some members of one community an alleged entitlement to particular sites and land, amounting to a license to tear down the religious places of other communities. Thomas de Quincey has an interesting essay called "murder considered as one of the Fine Arts."Rewriting of history for bellicose use can also presumably, be a very fine art.

I note the contemporary confounding of historical studies in India as the starting point of this lecture even though I shall not be directly concerned with addressing these distortions: there are many superb historians in India to give these misconstruction their definitive due. Instead, I shall be concerned with outlining some methodological issues that relate to the subject of truth and falsehood in general history. I will also try to develop and defend a view of history as "an enterprise of knowledge."

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[1] Appeared in the 'New Humanist' Summar 2001

There will be occasional references to contemporary debates (because I shall illustrate the general points with example from Indian history), but the overall focus will be on more general themes. There will be occasions, in this context, to take a fresh look at Indian's persistent heterodoxy, which includes not only its tendency towards multi-religious and multicultural coexistence (a point emphasized in Rabindra Nath Tagore's vision of India's history') but also its relevance for the development of science and mathematics in India. For history is not only an enterprise of knowledge in itself, it cannot but have a special involvement with the history of other enterprises of knowledge.

The view of history as an enterprise of knowledge is of course very old- fashioned: I am not trying to innovate anything whatsoever. However this and related epistemic approaches to history have taken some hard knocks over the last few decades. These have come not so much from sectarian bigots (who have barely addressed issues of method) but in the hands of sophisticated methodologists who are not only sceptical of the alleged virtues of modernity and objectivity (often for understandable reason) but have ended up being deeply suspicious also of the idea of truth or false hood in history. They have been keen in particular to emphasize the relativity of perspectives and the ubiquity of different points of view.

Perspectives and points of view, I would argue, are indeed important not just in history, but in every enterprise of knowledge. This is partly because our observations are inescapably "positional" Distant objects, for example, cannot but look smaller, and yet it is the job of analysis and scrutiny to place the different positional views in their appropriate perspectives to arrive at an integrated and coherent picture. The elementary recognition of the positionality of observations and perceptions does not do away with ideas of truth and falsehood, nor with the need to exercise reasoned judgement faced with conflicting evidence and clashing perspectives. I shall not here reiterate the methodological arguments I have presented elsewhere, such as in "positional Objectivity" in philosophy and public Affairs but will discuss their relevance to the interpretation of Indian history.

Indeed describing the past is like all other reflective judgment, which have to take not of the demands of veracity and the discipline of knowledge. The discipline includes the study of knowledge formation, including the history of science (and the constructive influences that are important in the cultivation of science) and also the history of histories (where differences in perspective call for disciplined scrutiny and are of importance themselves as objects of study). I shall be concerned with each.
I should make one more motivational remark, I address this talk primarily to non-historians, like myself, who take an interest in history. I am aware that no self respecting, historian will peacefully listen to an economist trying to tell them what their discipline is like. But history is not just for historians. It affects the lives of the public at large. We not historians do not have to establish our entitlement to talk

about history.

Rather, a good point of departure is to ask: why is history so often invoked in popular discussion? Also, what can the general public get from history? Why, we must also ask, is history such a battleground?

Knowledge and its use

Let me begin by discussing some distinct motivations that influence the public's interest in history.

1. **Epistemic interest:** The fact that we tend to have, for one reason or another, some interest in knowing more about what happened in the past is such a simple thought that it is somewhat embarrassing to mention this at a learned gathering. But, surely, catering to our curiosity about the past must count amount the reasons for trying to learn something about historical events. An ulterior motive is not essential for taking an interest in history (even thought ulterior reasons may also exits often enough).

The simplicity of the idea of historical curiosity is, however, to some extent deceptive, because the reason for our curiosity about the past can be very diverse and sometimes quite complex. The reason can be something every practical (such as learning from a past mistake), or engagingly illuminating (such as knowing about the lives of common people in a certain period in history), or largely recreational (such as investigating the chronology and history of Indian's multiplicity of calendars). Also, the historical question asked need not be straightforward, and may even be highly speculative such as Rabindranath Tagore's interesting but bold conjecture that the "mythical version of king Janamejaya's ruthless serpent sacrifice" may quite possibly stand for an actual historical events involving an "attempted extermination of the entire Naga race" by the dominate power in ancient India, whether or not it is easy to satisfy our curiosity (it may not always be possible to settle a debate regarding what actually happened), truth has an obvious enough role in exercises of this kind. In fact, curiosity is a demand for truth on a particular subject.

2. **Practical reason:** Historical connections are often involved in the context of contemporary politics and policies. Indeed, present-day attitudes in politics and society are often strongly influenced by the reading – or misreading – of the history of past events. For example, sectarian tensions build frequently on grievances (spontaneous or cultivated) linked to past deeds (real or imagined) of one group against another. This is well illustrated, for example, by the recent massacres in Rwanda or former Yugoslavia, where history—or imagined history—was often involved, concerning alleged past records of hostilities between Hutus and Tutsis, or between Serbs and Albanians, respectively. Since these uses of history are aimed primarily at contemporary acts and strategles, the counteracting arguments, which too invoke history, thought in the opposite direction, also end up being inescapably linked to current affairs. Given the dialectical context, we may be forced to take an

interest in historical disputations on battlegrounds that have been chosen by others—not ourselves.

For example in defending the role of secularism in contemporary India, it is not in any way essential to make any claim whatsoever about how India's Mughal rulers behaved – whether they were sectarian or assimilative, whether they were oppressive or tolerant. Yet in the political discussions that have accompanied the activist incursions of communal politics in contemporary India (well illustrated, for example, by the rhetoric that accompanied the demolition of the Babri Masjid), a heavily carpentered characterization of the Mughal rule as anti-Hindus was repeatedly invoked. Since this characterization was to a great extent spurious and based on arbitrary selection, to leave that point unaddressed would have, in the context of the on going debates, amounted to negligence in practical reason, and not just an epistemic abstinence. Even the plausibility or otherwise of the historical argument that some of the juridical roots of Indian secularism can be traced to Mughal jurisprudence (a thesis I have tried to present in my paper, "Reach of Reason: East and west"), even though a matter of pure history, ends up inescapably as having some relevance for contemporary politics (even through that was not a claim I made).
The enterprise of knowledge links in this case with the use of that knowledge. However this does not in any why; reduce the relevance of truth in seeking knowledge. The fact that knowledge has its use does not, obviously, make the enterprise of acquiring knowledge in any way redundant. In fact, quite the contrary.

3.Identity scrutiny: Underlying the political debates, there is often enough a deeper issue related to the way we construct and characterize our own identities, in which too historical knowledge – or alleged knowledge –can play an important part. Our sense of identity is strongly influenced by our understanding of our past. We do not, of course, have a personal past prior to our birth, but our self-perceptions are associated with the shared history of the members of a particular group to which we think we "belong" and with which we "identify." Our allegiances draw on the evocation of histories of our identity groups.

A scrutiny of this use of history cannot be independent of the philosophical question as to whether our identities are primarily matters of 'discovery' (as many 'communitarian' thinkers, such as Michael Sandal, claim), or whether they are to a significant extent matters of selection and choice (of course, within given constraints—as indeed all choices inescapably are). Arguments that rely on the assumption of the unique centrality of one's community-based identity survive by privileging—typically implicitly – that identity over other identities(which may be connected with, say, class, or gender, or language, or political commitments, or cultural influences). In consequence, they restrict the domain of one's alleged "historical roots" in a truly dramatics way. Thus, the increasing search for a Hindu view of Indian history not only has problems with epistemic veracity (an issue I

discussed earlier), but also involves the philosophical problem of categorical oversimplification.

It would, for example, have problem in coming to terms with, say, Rabindranath Tagore's description of his own background in the religion of man as "a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British." No less importantly, it cannot but be in some tension with the sense of pride than an Indian may choose to have, irrespective of his or her own religious background, at the historical achievements of, say, Ashoka or Akbar, or Kalidas or Kabir, or Aryabhata or Bhaskara. To deny the role of reasoned choice, which can draw on the knowledge of the past, can be a very serious loss indeed. Even those who want to identify with Indian's historical achievements and perhaps take some pride in them (as legitimate enough concern) must also examine critically what to take pride in, since it is easy to be misled into a narrow alley through incitements to ignore India's capacious heterodoxy in favour of a constricted sectarian identity. While discovery and choice compete as the basic of identity, knowledge and choice are essentially complementary to each other. Engagement with issues of identity enriches the enterprise of knowledge and extends its reach.

Science and Intellectual Heterodoxy

Let me now move to a more active view of the enterprise of knowledge, and turn to the history of science, which is among the historical subjects of study. As has already been argued, history is not only an enterprise of knowledge; its subject matter includes other enterprises of knowledge. The issue of heterodoxy, to which reference was made earlier, is particularly important here. Indeed, I would argue that there is a general connection between intellectual heterodoxy and the pursuit of science, and that this connection deserves more attention than it tends to get.

Heterodoxy is important for scientific advance because new ideas and discoveries have to emerge initially as heterodoxy views, at variance with established understanding. One need reflect only on the history of the scientific contributions of say, Galileo of Newton or Darwin, to see the role of heterodoxy in the process. The history of science is integrally linked with heterodoxy.

If this interpretation is correct, then the roots of the flowering of Indian science and mathematics that occurred in and around the Gupta period (beginning particularly with Aryabhata and Varahamihira) can be intellectually associated with persistent expressions of heterodoxies, which pre-existed these contributions. In fact, Sanskrit and Pali have a larger literature in defence of atheism, agnosticism and theological skepticism than exists in any other classical language.

The origins of mathematical and scientific developments in the Gupta period are often traced to earlier works in mathematics and science in India, and this is indeed worth investigating, despite the historical mass that has been created recently by the

ill- founded championing of the so-called "Vedic mathematics" and "Vedic science," based on very little evidence. What has, I would argue, more claim to attention as a precursor of scientific advances in the Gupta period is the tradition of scepticism that can be found in pre-Gupta India – going back to at least the sixth century B.C – particular in matters of religion and epistemic orthodoxy. Indeed, the openness of approach that allowed Indian mathematicians and scientists to learn about the state of these professions in Babylon, Greece and Rome. Which are plentifully cited in early Indian astronomy (particularly in the siddhantas), can also be seen as a part of this inclination towards heterodoxy.

Observation, Experience and Scientific Methods

Indeed, the development of India science has clear methodological connections with the general epistemological doubts expressed by skeptical school of thought that developed at an earlier period. This included the insistence on relying only on observational evidence (with scepticism of unobserved variables), for example in the Lokayata and Charvaka writings, not to mention Gautama Buddha's powerfully articulated agnosticism and his president questioning of received beliefs. The untimely death of professor Bimal Matilal has robbed us of the chance of benefiting from his extensive programme of systematic investigation of the history of Indian epistemology, but his already published works, particularly perceptions bring out the reach of unorthodox early writings on epistemology (by both Buddhist and Hindu writers) in the period that can be linked to the flowering of Indian science and mathematics in Gupta era.

Similarly, the expression of hereticism and heterodoxy patiently – if somewhat grudgingly – recorded even in the Ramayana (for example, in the form of javali's advice to Rama to defy his father's odd promise) presents methodological reason to be sceptical of the orthodox position in this field. Indeed, in A Vision of India's History, Rabindranath Tagore also notes the oddity of the central story of Rama's pious acceptance of banishment based on "the absurd reason ....about the week old king [Rama's father], yielding to a favorites wife, who took advantages of a vague promise which could fit itself to any demand of hers, however preposterous." Tagore takes it as evidence of "the later degeneracy of mind," when "some causal words uttered in a moment of infatuation could be deemed more sacred than the truth which is based upon justice and perfect knowledge."

There is not after-world, nor any religious practice for attaining that. Follow what is within your experience and do not trouble yourself with what lies beyond the province of human experience. (Translation from Makhanlal Sen, Valmiki Ramayana)

As it happens, the insistence that we rely only on observation and experience is indeed a central issue in the departures in astronomy — initiated by Aryabhata and others — from established theological cosmology. The departures presented in his book Aryabhatiya,

completed in 421 Saka or 499 A.D., which came to be discussed extensively by mathematicians and astronomers who followed Aryabhata (particularly Varahamihira, Brahmagupta and Bhaskara, and were also discussed In their Arabic translations), included, among others: (1) Aryabhata's advocacy of the diurnal motion of the earth (rather than the apparent rotation of the sun around ft), (2) a corresponding theory of gravity to explain why objects are not thrown out as the earth chums, (3) recognition of the parametric variability of the concept of "up" and "down" depending on where one is located on the globe, and (4) explanation of lunar and solar eclipses in terms respectively of the earth's shadow on the moon and the moon's obscuring of the sun. Observational arguments, based on what Javali calls "the province of human experience," are central to the departures initiated by Aryabhata in these and related fields (more on this presently). In the enterprise of knowledge involving the natural sciences, the intellectual connections between scepticism, heterodoxy and observational insistence, on the one hand, and manifest scientific advances, on the other, require much further exploration and scrutiny than they seem to have received so far.

History of Histories and Observational Perspectives

The observational issue is important also for the particular subject of history of histories, or metahistories (as we may call them). Given the importance *d* perspectives in historical writings, history of histories can tell us a great deal not only about the subject of those writings, but also about their authors and the traditions and perspectives they reflect. For example, James Mill's The History of British India, published in 1817, tells us probably as much about imperial Britain as about India. This three-volume history, written by Mill without visiting India (Mill seemed to think that this non-visit made his history more objective), played a major role In introducing the British governors of India (such as the influential Macaulay) to a particular characterization of the country. There is indeed much to learn from Mill's history — not just about India, but more, in fact, about the perspective from which this history was written. This is an illustration of the general point that the presence of positionality and observational perspective need not weaken the enterprise of knowledge, and may in fact help to extend its reach.

James Mill disputed and rejected practically every claim ever made on behalf of Indian culture and intellectual traditions, but paid particular attention to dismissing Indian scientific works. Mill rebuked early British administrators (particularly, Sir William Jones) for having taken the natives "to be a people of high civilization, while they have in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization." Indeed, since colonialism need not be especially biased against any particular colony compared with any other subjugated community, Mill had no great difficulty in coming to the conclusion that the Indian civilization was at par with other inferior ones known to Mill: "very nearly the same with that of the Chinese, the Persians, and the Arabians," and also the other "subordinate nations, the Japanese, Cochin-chinese, Siamese, Burmans, and even Malays and Tibetans".

Mill was particularly dismissive of the alleged scientific and mathematical works in India. He denied the generally accepted belief that the decimal system (with place values and the

placed use of zero) had emerged in India, and refused to accept that Aryabhata and his followers could have had anything interesting to say on the diurnal motion of the earth and the principles of gravitation. Writing his own history of histories, Mill chastised Sir William Jones for believing in these "stories," and concluded that it was "extremely natural that Sir William Jones, whose pundits had become acquainted with the ideas of European philosophers respecting the system of the universe, should hear from them that those ideas were contained in their own books."

A Contrast of Perspectives

It is, in fact, interesting to compare Mill's History with another history of India, called Ta'rikh al-hind (written In Arabic eight hundred years earlier, in the 11th century) by the Iranian mathematician Alberuni. Alberuni, who was born in Central, Asia in 973 A.D., and mastered Sanskrit after coming to India, studied Indian texts on mathematics, natural sciences, literature, philosophy, and religion. Alberuni writes clearly on the invention of the decimal system in India (as do other Arab authors) and also about Aryabhata's theories on the earth's rotation, gravitation, and related subjects.

These writings contrast sharply with Mill's history from a dominant colonial perspective well established by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The interest in Mill's dismissive history in imperial Britain (Macaulay, as quoted by John Clive In his Introduction to Mill's History, described Mill's History of British India to be "on the whole the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon") contrasts with extensive constructive interest in these Indian works among Islamic mathematicians and scientists in Iran and in the Arab world.

In fact, Brahmagupta's pioneering Sanskrit treatise on astronomy had been first translated into Arabic in the 8th century by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim alFazari and again by Alberuni three hundred years later in the eleventh century (since Alberuni had certain criticisms of the previous translation). Several Indian works on medicine, science and philosophy had Arabic rendering by the 9th century, and so on. It was through the Arabs that the Indian decimal system and numerals reached Europe, as did Indian writings in mathematics, science and literature, in general. Indeed, history of histories, particulary about science, can tell us a great deal about the nature of political and social relations between the different countries (such as Iran and Gupta India, on the one hand Britain and colonial India, on the other). As it happens, Alberuni's history also provides interesting illumination on scientific discussions within India, and particularly on the constructive role of heterodoxy in this context. Even thought Alberuni himself tended to reject Aryabhata's throry regarding the diurnal motion of the earth, he describes patiently the Indian arguments indefence of the plausibility of Aryabhaya's theory, including the related theory of gravity.

Conservatism, Courage and Science

It is, in this context, particularly interesting to examine Alberuni's discussion of Brahmagupta's conservative rejection of the exciting depertures proposed by Aryabhata and his followers on the subject of lunar and solar eclipses. Alberuni quotes Brahmagupta's criticism of Aryabhata and his followers, in defence of the orthodox religious theory involving Rahu and the so- called "head" that is supposed to devour the sun and the moon, and find it clearly unpersuasive and reactionary. He quotes Brahmagupta's supplication to religious orthodoxy, In Brahmasiddhanta:

> Some people think that the eclipse is not caused by the Head. This however is a foolish idea for it is he in fact who eclipses and the generality of the inhabitants of the world say that it is the Head that eclipses. The Veda which is the word of god from the mouth of Brahman says that the Head eclipses....on the contrary. Varahamihira, Shrishena, Aryabhata and Vishnuchandra maintain that the eclipse is not caused by the Head, but by the moon and the shadow of the earth, in direct opposition to all (to the generally of men), and from the enmity against the just- mentioned dogma. (Alberuni's India)

Alberuni who is quite excited about Aryabhata's scientific theories of eclipses, then accuses Brahmagupta (a great mathematician himself) for lacking the moral courage of Aryabhata in dissenting from the established orthodoxy. He points out that, in practice, Brahmagupta too follows Aryabhata's method in predicting the eclipses but this does not prevent Brahmagupta from sharply criticizing—from an essentially theological perpective –Aryabhata and his followers for being heretical and heterodox. Alberuni puts it thus:

> ......we shall not argue with him [Brahmagupta], but only whisper into his ear:... why do you after having spoken such [harsh] words [against Aryabhata and his followers], then begin to calculate the diameter of the moon in order to explain the eclipsing of the sun, and the diameter of the shadow of the earth in order to explain its eclipsing the moon? Why do you compute both eclipses in agreement with the theory of those heretics, and not according to the views of those with whom you think it is proper to agree? (Alberuni's India)

The connection between heterodoxy and scientific advance is indeed close and big departures in science require methodological independence as well as analytical and constructive skill. Even thought Aryabhata, Varahamihira and Brahmagupta were all dead for many hundred years before Alberuni was writing on their controversies and their implications, nevertheless Alberuni carefully critical scientific history helps to bring out the main issues involved and in particular the need for heterodoxy as well as moral courage in pursuit of science.

A Concluding Remark

To conclude, I have tried to illustrate the different ways in which history has relevance for non-historians – indeeded the general public.

First, there are diverse ground for the public's involvement with history which include (1) the apparently simple attractions of epistemic interest, (2) the contentious correlates of practical reason and (3) the scrutiny of identity-based thinking. All of them – directly or indirectly – involve and draw on the enterprise of knowledge.

Second, history is not only itself an enterprise of knowledge its domain of study incorporates all other enterprises of knowledge including the history of science. In this context it is easy to see the role of heterodoxy and methodological independence in scientific advance. The intellectual connections between heterodoxy (especially theological skepticism) and scientific pursuits (especially big scientific departures) deserve more attention in the history of sciences in India.

Third, metahistories – or histories of histories – also bring out the relevance of an appropriate climate for the enterprise of knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge not only requires an open mind (the contrast between Alberuni's scientific interest and mill's colonial predispositions radically differentiate their treatments of the same subject matter), it also requires an inclination to accept heterodoxy and the courage to stand up against orthodoxy (Alberuni's critique of Brahmagupta's criticism of Aryabhata relates to issue).The plurality of perspectives extends the domain of the enterprise of knowledge rather than undermining the possibility of the enterprise.

Science the rewriting of Indian history from the slanted perspective of sectarian orthodoxy not only undermines historical objectivity but also militates against the sprit of scientific skepticism and intellectual heterodoxy it is important to emphasize the centrality of skepticism and heterodoxy in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. The incursion of sectarian orthodoxy in Indian history involves two distinct problems, to wit, (1) narrow sectarianism, and (2) unreasoned orthodoxy. The enterprise of knowledge is threatened by both.

9

Cultural Unity of India

The Evidence of Archaeology and Historical Geography

One of the most visible signs of early contact between different parts of India is the spread of objects which are either identical in form and manufacture or possess undeniable family resemblance over large parts of the country. From this point of view, the period of the Indus Civilization is as good a meaningful period as any. First, the objects of this civilization are distributed from Baluchistan-Iran border to roughly Haridwar and from Jammu to the Kim estuary in Gujarat and further south in Maharashtra. This distribution is most noticeable during the mature and late phases of the Indus Civilization, i.e. roughly from *c.* 2700 to 1300 BC. Secondly, the material needs of this civilization threw open many resource areas both within and outside its distribution zone and led to the development of various routes, many of which retained their significance in later periods. For instance, there was a clear alignment in the Indus period between the Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan sector in the northwest and Rohtak in the Delhi sector. The route came via Multan, Harappa, Pakpattan, Abohar, Sirsa, Hansi, and Hissar,

throwing offshoots all along the way. One of these offshoots touched Bhatinda, and even now a major bridge near the Bhatinda fort is called Multani bridge. The Rohtak-Hansi-Hissar-Sirsa-Fazilka-Abohar alignment was a major alignment in the historic period as well. The significance of the Indus period in mobilizing and channelizing both the raw materials and finished goods is well understood. Among other things, the finished cores made of the chert of the Sukkur-Rorhi Hills in Sind can be traced at Balu in Jind in Haryana. There need not be any doubt about the fact that the vast area in which Indus Civilization sites have been found evolved a network of interconnection between its component parts.

It is equally important to know how the Indus distribution area was interacting with the areas outside it. The occurrence of a late Harappan occupational level at Daimabad (Sali 1986) is a pointer in this direction. In another direction, the find of perforated ware of Indus tradition at Ramnagar on the bank of the Ganga opposite Banaras is mind-boggling, but the identification was done at the most competent level and there is apparently no reason to doubt it (personal information from R. Tewari).

The significance of the occurrence of the Indus script at Daimabad in the upper Godavari Valley and that of perforated ware at Ramnagar in the middle Ganga Valley are worth pondering over. Considering that at the other end the Indus artefacts are found in Baluchistan and Jammu, there was apparently an interconnecting orbit from this northern limit to the upper Godavari Valley and the middle Ganga Plain as far south as Banaras during the late phase of the Indus Civilization. Daimabad is Late Harappan and the chalcolithic context in which the Harappan

perforated ware has been found at Ramnagar belongs to the local chalcolithic context well within the second millennium BC.

A comparatively recent archaeological discovery has considerably highlighted this orbit. In the excavations at Sinoli, a presumably Late Harappan site near Baghpat (Sharma, Nauriyal and Prabhakar 2005-6), a copper antennae-hilted sword has been found, proving that the upper Gangetic Valley 'Copper Hoard 'tradition is linked with the Late Harappan tradition. I would put Sinoli around the middle of the second millennium BC. Such 'antennae-hilted swords' have been found in Gujarat on the west and the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu and the Tea/Coffee plantation belt of Kerala in the south (the details in Chakrabarti and Lahiri 1996). This is remarkable because this shows that as early as the middle of the second millennium BC there is archaeological evidence that the Doab region was linked with west India and the deep south. I am not enthusiastic about the find of a Neolithic celt with Indus signs pecked into its surface from Cuddalore south of Pondicherry but the antennae-hilted copper swords have been found along a well-known stretch of the Ganga Plain-Deccan – south India route, and there is no reason to doubt the significance of these finds. Because of its being part of the Harappan tradition, the Doab area must have known also the western areas of the Harappan distribution belt up to Panjab, Sind and Baluchistan. Whether the concept of Bharatavarsha was there or not, the people were then certainly interacting over a vast stretch of the land which came to be called Bharatavarsha in literature. Tentatively, I would accept the chronological line of the mid-second millennium BC as a benchmark line in this regard.

As far as the dissemination of cultivated crops is concerned, interesting data have begun to emerge in the case of wheat, barley and rice.

Wheat and barley occur in the 8th millennium BC at Mehrgarh south of Quetta in Baluchistan. Both these crops occur in the Neolithic level of Jhusi (Pokharia 2009) opposite Allahabad. The dates from this level of Jhusi fall in the 8th and 6th millennia BC. This is supported by at least one early date from the Neolithic level of Tokwa (Pokharia 2008) near Mirzapur. On the other hand, the cultivation of rice began in central Ganga plain and the adjacent Vindhyan stretch in the 8th-6th millennia BC with its crucial evidence coming from Lohuradeva near Gorakhpur, Koldihawa and Chopani Mando in the periphery of the Vindhyas near Allahabad, and Jhusi in Allahabad itself (for Lohuradeva,, Tewari et al. 2007-8). The story of the dissemination of rice cultivation is not yet clear but rice is known to occur in the context of the Indus tradition in Panjab and Haryana. The spread of different cultivated crops all over the subcontinent has its own story but roughly between the 8th and the 3rd millennia BC, most of the crops that we find in this region now attained more or less a subcontinental spread.

The ease with which many of the cultural traits spread from one part of the subcontinent to another had a lot to do with a basic character of its geography:

> The one clear unity which India possessed throughout history has been geographical. In no other part of the world, unless perhaps in South America, are the physical features on a grander scale. Yet no where else are they more simply combined into a single region.

This was written by a geographer, H.J. Mackinder (1922). To the south of the highlands from the western rim of Baluchistan

to the Patkoi and Arakan Yoma in the east, there was no major hindrance to human movements from one part of the subcontinent to another. And yet, some later geographers ignored this element and tried to impose some arbitrary cultural divides and rigid lines of movements on its map. I have tried to discuss some of the relevant issues in my *The Geo-Political Orbits of Ancient India* (Chakrabarti 2010a). In trying to understand how different parts of the Indian subcontinent interacted throughout ancient history, the book underlines how politics was enacted in various geographical orbits that kept interacting throughout the period without any fixed boundary or 'divide'. By closely examining the focal geographical points along which ancient Indian dynasties tried to expand their political power and interact with other contemporary dynasties, the book highlights the range of geographical possibilities of the regional power centres of various periods in ancient India. It also underlines the extent to which they operated within that frame. The book further argues that the web of inter-regional interaction was not limited to a particular set of regions but had a pan-Indian ramification. None of the regions could therefore thrive in political isolation. It underscores that regions in ancient Indian history never had any immutable historical shape or identity but were fluid, both in their interactions and outlines.

The notion of fixed geographical lines has seriously harmed the cause of Indian archaeological studies. For instance, the date of anything with Gangetic origin in the Deccan has been put at least 200 years later than its date in its centre of origin in the Ganga Plain. The way the NBP, a distinctive Ganga plain pottery of c. 800 BC and later, has been dated in the Deccan is a case in point. In the Deccan the NBP has seldom been put before 300 BC. This has been very unwise because this has distorted the

chronology of many Deccanese and even south Indian archaeological sites where cross-dating with the NBP is an important chronological marker. For instance, at Korkai, a port site in the Tamraparni delta area of the present-day Ramanathapuram district, a single radiocarbon date associated with its NBP-bearing level is in the 8th century BC or somewhat earlier. This was considered chronologically misfit, but a close examination of the NBP found in a neighbouring site, Alagunkalam, makes us feel that the Korkai date may well be correct because the Alagankulam material is identical in its colour and hue with the best Ganga Plain material (for a discussion of the issue, Chakrabarti 2010b). This is also likely to fit in the context of the radiocarbon date from a level at Porunthal near Palni at the foot of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu. This level contains sherds with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and the date has been found to be around 500 BC (490 +/- 30 BC, uncalibrated), showing that the beginning of the historical period in Tamil Nadu may well be roughly contemporary with that in the Ganga Plain (personal information from K. Rajan, 2011). The sheer quality of the few pieces of the NBP that occur at Alagankulam (examined by R. Tewari, R.N. Singh and myself in 2005) makes us wonder if these sherds cannot be as early as *c.* 800 BC. If so, there should not be much difficulty in describing the early historic growth in Tamil Nadu as a process that took place between *c.* 800 BC and *c.* 500 BC, something that took place in the Ganga plain too. Whatever may transpire in future, I find no reason why artifacts like the NBP should be invariably dated outside their original distribution zone some centuries later than the date of their origin in the Ganga Valley. There was much faster movement of cultural items all over the subcontinent than we are prepared to admit.

The openness of Indian physical geography except at its northern perimeter has facilitated the development of a dense network of routes linking its various parts. The literary sources may underline some of them but for the details archaeological groundwork is necessary. For the past two decades or so, I have been doing precisely this and may put forward some of the relevant conclusions in the rest of this paper.

The incorporation of the Uttarakhand Himalayas in the orbit of India's sacred geography is a fact acknowledged widely in the traditional literary sources. One wonders if archaeology can throw any light on the general range of chronology by which it was likely to have been achieved (discussed in detail in Chakrabarti 2007). This sector of the Himalayas has a few major entry-points from the plains. The first one is at Kalsi where the upper course of the Yamuna has carved an access route, the earliest antiquity of which is marked by the Asokan edict at Kalsi itself. This entry leads to the uppermost stretch of the Yamuna Valley where Purola is located. This is a Painted Grey Ware site. The second entry is at Haridwar, and here, not far from Haridwar itself and towards Hrishikesh, is a Painted Grey Ware site. From Hrishikesh the road to Badrinath passes through Srinagar which is about half-way towards Badrinath. Srinagar in its immediate vicinity has a Painted Grey Ware site. It may be added that the plain opposite Manasa Devi hill at Haridwar has yielded painted pottery of the Harappan tradition, and there are sites of the Ochre Coloured Pottery and painted pottery of the Harappan tradition in the Saharanpur plain at the foot of the range where Kalsi is located. The third entry is through Kotdwar near Najibabad. A route links Kotdwar with Pauri, from where it is possible to join the Hrishikesh-Badrinath route via Srinagar. The Najibabad sector also possesses Painted Grey Ware. The fourth entry is through

Kashipur which is easily accessible from Rampur. There is a rich Painted Grey Ware site near Kashipur and there are also sites with the painted pottery of the Harappan tradition in this area. The fifth major entry is from Tanakpur which takes one to Champawat and Pithoragarh sectors of Uttarakhand. There is a Buddhist stupa site of *c.* 2nd century BC a few kilometres west of Tanakpur but from somewhere in Pithoragarh copper anthropomorphs, which are considered inseparable parts of the upper Gangetic Valley 'Copper Hoards' and have to be considered related to the late Harappan tradition after the discoveries at Sinoli, have been reported. It may be noted that Pithoragarh lies on the way to Mansarovar.

It may be recalled that the Uttarakhand Himalayas are full of steep V-shaped valleys with little cultivable lands being available either at the valley-bottoms or on their sides. Why the Painted Grey Ware settlers were moving into this area along defined routes to some pilgrim centres ? Was there any awareness of this zone among the people of the Copper Hoard/late Harappan tradition in the plains at its gate ? Nobody present in this sector of the plain could be unaware of the hills but whether they decided to enter this or not is a different matter. There is as yet no valid archaeological evidence except the occurrence of copper anthropomorphs in Pithoragarh. As far as the Painted Grey Ware is concerned, the evidence is unequivocal: from the Uttarkashi sector (cf. Purola) to Haridwar entry and Srinagar the Painted Grey Ware people moved deep into the Uttarakhand Himalayas which loom large in the Indian sacred geography. There is no independent date of the Painted Grey Ware from this sector but a date around 1000 BC may broadly be accepted, providing a clue to the time when the sacred character of the geography of this part of the Himalayas may be assumed to have developed a clear

profile. It is profiles such as these which throw light on how the cultural unity emerged at various points in various parts of the subcontinent.

Those familiar with the early political history of the subcontinent will know about the links of the Taxila region with the upper Ganga Plain. The importance of Takshasila near modern Rawalpindi in the early Indian literature is an important indicator of this link. No Indus site has yet been found in the Taxila area, but otherwise the entire area from Pakistani Panjab to the upper Ganga Plain is dotted with Indus sites, and our understanding is that this link between western Panjab and the upper Ganga Plain was maintained by two main alignments. The first one was Ludhiana-Ferozepur alignment which led to the Lahore sector, where Sohdara marked the ancient Chenab crossing. There is a straight run from Sohdara to Taxila with sites like Jhelam and Manikyala on the way. The second—and more important—alignment lay through Gurdaspur and Kalanour, both on the Indian side of the border. Kalanour is a massive site near the border and directly connected with Sialkot, from where Sohdara and thus the route to Taxila are easily approachable. What has to be understood that the linkage of the Taxila territory with the upper Ganga Plain near Delhi is rooted in the Indus times and takes textual shape by the time of the early Buddhist literature. Indus sites have not yet been found in the Sialkot sector of Pakistan and possibly not in the Lahore sector either. However, there are sites with pottery of the Indus tradition right up to the Siwaliks on the Indian side of Panjab and similarly there should be Indus-related sites up to the Siwaliks on the Pakistani side too (for the details, Chakrabarti 2010c). This is another instance of the subcontinent's cultural unity being given a chronological frame over a certain region.

These chronological frames will vary between different segments of the land. For instance, this chronological frame is considerably later in the case of the Bengal delta and the Brahmaputra Valley. The archaeological situations in both these areas are interesting. The available date of the NBP in the eastern part of the Bengal delta is *c.* 450 BC and there is no geographical difficulty in maintaining communications between this area and Assam along the Brahmaputra. In another part of the Bengal Delta the main communication point with Assam was the Karatoya Valley where a major archaeological site is located. This site—Mahasthangarh—has also yielded the NBP, although one is not sure of its radiocarbon dates here. The problem is that there does not seem to be any well-defined pre-NBP deposit in the Bangladesh part of the Bengal delta. This must be due to the lack of suitable work because Bangarh, only a short distance away from Mahasthangarh and in the same type of geographical setting, has recently yielded a substantial pre-NBP black-and-red ware deposit. The problem is more accentuated in the Assam section of the Brahmaputra Valley. No indisputable pre-Christian material has yet been found in this area. I can think of only two pieces of evidence: a second century BC bowl with incurved rim from the surface at Tejpur and a terracotta ring-well of about the same general period excavated in the cliff section of the Brahmaputra at the same place (information from S. Jamal Hasan 2011). I would argue that the Brahmaputra Valley part of Assam came into the Gangetic orbit by the beginning of the early historic period, although more positive data will be needed on this point.

The way the different sections of the subcontinent have interacted and shared elements of material culture calls for detailed research on the ground. The building up of its chronology segment by segment is also an important point. However, let

there be no doubt about the closeness of this interaction in the material domain of life. One season I scraped some pottery of *c.* 200 BC out of a cliff at Ror in the hilly region of Kangra, part of the ancient Trigarta. Next season, I scraped the identical pottery out of the Damodar cliff at Pokharna in Bankura. The point is that by *c.* 200 BC there was hardly any noticeable difference between the pottery types of the entire sweep of the country from Kangra to Paschim Banga. The fact that this uniformity extends well back in time is beyond doubt, but detailed comparative studies between different areas still remain to be undertaken.

The Vindhya-Satpura divide is supposedly a major divide in Indian history and geography. Contrary to this impression, the Ganga Plain and the Deccan were linked by a host of routes, the antiquity of which can securely be placed in the mid-second millennium BC, if not considerably earlier. These routes had their own ramifications in the Deccan and the southern peninsula and carved out a vast unit of political and economic interaction between the Konkan coast and the Godavari delta on the one hand and between the area south of the Narmada and the furthest parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala on the other. In 1999-2006 I studied these routes on the ground (Chakrabarti 2005, 2010b) beginning with the Gangetic Valley links with Maharashtra and Andhra. I shall offer a minimal outline of these routes in the rest of this paper.

Beginning with Rajagriha and Pataliputra, we find that the alignments towards the Deccan from these places converged upon Bhabua near Sasaram to follow the Bhabua to Chakia and Ahraura alignment towards Banaras which could be approached from this alignment in two ways: either from Ahraura or from Bhuili, the latter accessible directly from Chakia. The Ganga for Banaras

was crossed at Ramnagar. From Ahraura a route went up to Mirzapur but a route also went across the Sonabhadra or Robertsganj Plateau to the crossing of the Son at Agori Khas, from where there were routes to the Ramgarh area in the southern section of Sarguja Plain. The Hasdo River was followed in this section to enter the Bilaspur section of Chhattisgarh and end up near Raipur. The options at Raipur were to travel to the Vizianagram section of the Andhra coast through Bastar or to travel straight to the modern Gondia section of Vidarbha to turn south towards the Karimabad-Nizamabad section of Andhra. One could also travel straight west till the Aurangabad section and eventually Paithan on the Godavari were reached.

The route which went from Ahraura to Mirzapur was joined at Mirzapur by a route which came from Banaras following the left bank of the Ganga till Agiabir where the Ganga was crossed for Mirzapur. This route was also joined by a route which came from Sravasti north of Ayodhya and passed through Jaunpur. From Mirzapur the route climbed the Vindhyan scarp near Lalganj and Halia and proceeded towards Rewa, the ancient Chedi country. The Rewa Plateau received the Deccan-bound routes also from ancient Prayag and Kausambi, which ascended the Vindhyas at Baldaha Ghat and Sohagi Ghat. A little beyond Rewa the route bifurcated, one going to Chhattisgarh through Bandhavgarh to join the Bilaspur-Raipur alignment. Another route went to Jabalpur and turned south emerging in the Banganga plain near Pauni through Balaghat. From Pauni, the northern section of Andhra was easily accessible. Or, the route moved from Jabalpur to the area south of Bhopal where the Narmada was crossed near Hosangabad and the Tapti at Burhanpur. Maharashtra was reached by crossing the Tapti at Burhanpur and passing by Asirgarh on the way.

Proceeding further north from Allahabad-Kausambi, one reaches the Kanpur area where a route comes through Lucknow, crosses the Ganga at Kanpur and goes up to Ghatampur on the bank of the Yamuna only to cross it and follow the Betwa River alignment up to Vidisha and beyond to reach the Narmada and finally Burhanpur. The Betwa alignment was joined by a route which came from the area of modern Etahwa.

Further up is the Agra-Mathura area. Here the initial target was to reach the Ujjain section of Malwa. Bateshwar on the Agra side was a major point and from here the line went straight to modern Shivpuri via Pawayya or ancient Padmavati, and from Shivpuri, the Ujjain area was approachable. The more important place in this section was Mathura. Here a part of Rajasthan had to be crossed to reach Malwa. Rajasthan was entered through Bharatpur and Deeg and the route went by Rupbas, Bayana and Ranthambhor till the Kota area and Ujjain beyond it were reached. My idea of this section is incomplete because I have just begun fieldwork (2011) in this sector. The importance of Ujjain is highlighted more if we think of an alignment moving from the direction of Delhi and Mathura towards the Malwa Plain, especially Mandasore from where Ujjain is only but a step. Mandasore is easily accessed from the Mewar Plain. From Ujjain there is a straight route through Nagda to Gujarat, but from Ujjain one can also cross the Narmada at Maheswar and follow the Kasargad-Burhanpur (Tapti crossing)-Ajanta-Bhokardan-Paithan alignment. From Ujjain one can also move towards Dhar and then go up to Barwani where also the Narmada can be crossed. From Barwani, the alignment beyond the Narmada is Dhulia-Chalisgaon-Pitalkhora-Ellora-Bhokardan (?) –Paithan. From Dhulia one can also go to Nasik, Kalyan or Sopara, the last two

on the Konkan coast. From Nasik one can even go to Junnar and reach the Konkan coast through Malsejghat and Nanaghat.

In the next stage I tried to determine the major alignments within Maharashtra, Andhra and the southern regions up to Cape Comorin and Kerala. A major focus of this study was also the coastline from Daman on the Konkan coast to Srikakulam in the Vamsadhara estuary of Andhra which was home to almost innumerable pre-industrial ports, some of which played a major role in the ancient context too. In the Konkan coast our points of consideration were its geographical features, the distribution of its port sites and the links of communication between these ports and their Maharashtra and Karnataka hinterlands through a large number of passes in the Western Ghats. On the eastern side of the Western Ghats, the north- south alignment of Satara, Kolhapur and Belgaum plays a crucial role in mediating the routes which linked the different sections of the Konkan coast to a vast region covering large sections of inner Maharashtra, the Gulbarga-Bijapur-Badamy-Bellary section of Karnataka, and through them Andhra, and at a further remove, Tamil Nadu. One can also add to this network Solapur in the east and Dharwar in the south. Viewed in the context of such wider links, the narrow coastal plain of Konkan and the associated openings of varying importance in the Western Ghats cease to be a closed world and become an integral part of the vast network of routes covering the Deccan and the southern peninsula

In the case of Tamil Nadu and Kerala the situation is different and has been so mainly because of their different geographical characters. First, because of the presence of the Palghat gap, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have been closely linked historically. There are also some less prominent but nonetheless

important openings to the south of the Palghat opening. Apart from the Palghat gap, all the passes linked to the Kerala coast led either to the Mysore Plateau or to the southern section of Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu there are clear entry points in the north, which are linked to the Mysore Plateau and the Rayalseema tract of Andhra. These entry points are important to judge the flow of events in Tamil Nadu history. There are also uplands in the interior of Tamil Nadu. The configuration of these uplands and the Palghat gap have greatly influenced its internal lines of movements. Two communication lines have always been important: the Coimbature-Salem-Dharmapuri axis, with its own approach to the Kerala coast, and the axis from Kanchipuram-Madras sector to the areas down south up to Madurai and Tinnevelly.

The major internal barrier in Andhra lies in the Rayalseema sector where both across the Nallamalai and Erramala there are a few passes. These passes kept the line of communication between the Raichur Doab and Bellary sections of Karnataka and the Andhra coast between the mouth of the Krishna and Nellore open. Equally important is the opening of Tirupati, a camping ground of pilgrims from the north to Tirupati and further south. From Vidarbha and eastern India Andhra was open both on the north and the east.

Thus, right from the Ganga-Yamuna alignment to the southern tip of the peninsula there was a dense network of ancient routes giving material expression to the interconnection between different areas and the growth of a shared culture. By the middle of the second millennium BC most parts of the subcontinent were likely to be in the know of each other.

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3

Who Owns the Indian Past?

The Case of the Indus Civilization

The question 'who owns the past' is not a rhetorical question. On the one hand, it is tied to the issue of identities, which has played a major role in archaeological research since its very inception, and on the other, it is bound up with the various features of cultural resource management including the thorny relationship between the mainstream archaeology and the rights of indigenous people in the countries like USA, Australia and Canada.

There is a vast amount of literature on both themes. The first one, i.e. the question of identity, is linked to the establishment of national identity as well as various other collective identities like gender, ethnicity and religion. The issue of identity may assume many forms and generate many debates. In the context of Israel and the Palestinian territory, it has been argued[1], for instance, that there are four types of 'desired pasts' there: (1) the Israeli desired past which is sought by the Israeli state and the Jewish organizations of the United States; (2) the conservative Christian past which is championed by the Christian fundamentalist organizations, the American School of Oriental

Research and the Biblical Archaeological Society; (3) the Palestinian desired past, favoured by the Palestinian rights organizations and Palestinian archaeologists and intellectuals; and finally, (4) the diplomatic desired past, as represented by the appointed officials of the US State department.

Issues such as these have always been parts of archaeological research tradition, but in the modern world where the public awareness of such issues is much sharper, archaeological literature has to be concerned with the process and nature of various identity-formations.

The second theme is equally visible, although currently at its sharpest only in the United States and Australia. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a federal law requiring agencies and institutions in receipt of federal funding to return native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to their respective peoples, was passed in 1990. Similarly, the recognition of the traditional land-rights of the Australian indigenous people has also led to the recognition of their control over the cultural objects, sacred places and human remains found in their land[2].

The study of the past cannot be said to have ever been free of its socio-politics. Since 1986, when the World Archaeological Congress held its first session in Southampton, the study of this socio-politics has been a part of the mainstream study of the subject. There can never be an one-to-one answer to an archaeological problem, however science-based or logical it may be. In each case, the data are located in a field of uncertainty, however small, and that is filled up by the researcher's own socio-political predilection.

The focus of my present essay is to examine how the different aspects of the Indus civilizational studies have been conditioned by the socio-politics of our attitudes to the Indian past.

I shall begin by taking up the problem of the date of the beginning of this civilization. Many Indian books still refer to the date propounded first in 1946 by Mortimer Wheeler, i.e. 2500 BC. That was based on Wheeler's own subjective estimate of the date of the earliest contact between the Indus Civilization and Mesopotamia. Assuming that this contact was not significantly earlier than the reign of the Mesopotamian king Sargon and accepting 2325 BC as Sargon's date, he arrived at the round figure of 2500 BC, allowing 175-odd years for this civilization to form a relationship with Mesopotamia. The earliest date of the Mesoptamian civilization, typified by the Early Dynastic Period is 2700/2800 BC. Thus, according to Wheeler's scheme, the Indus Civilization was later than the Mesopotamian civilization, which was natural in the light of his belief that the idea of civilization came to the Indus from the former. In 1931 John Marshall thought that the date of Indus-Mesopotamia contact was earlier than the period of Sargon and he arrived, through various subjective calculations, at the date of *c.* 3250 BC for the beginning of the civilization on the Indus. Marshall, who spent his life laying the foundations of Indian archaeology, did not believe that India owed her Bronze Age civilization to any foreign source and thus he had no interest in making it look late in comparison with Mesoptamia and Egypt. By the time Wheeler wrote, India had ceased to be the jewel in the British crown and he had no particular reason to feel enchanted by Indian antiquity.

The modern situation is no less intriguing. After the first crop of radiocarbon dates from the Indus sites, D.P. Agrawal,

who, as the Secretary of the Radiocarbon Committee of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, had a hand in obtaining some of them, argued that these dates, could not suggest anything earlier than 2400 BC as the date of the beginning of the mature Indus Civilization. He believed that this tallied with Wheeler's opinion that the Indus-Mesopotamia contact did not date before Sargon, forgetting that radiocarbon dates are not historical dates. Agrawal represents some Indian archaeologists of the 1960s and 1970s, who considered it unsafe to go beyond the hitherto accepted framework of Indian archaeology. The premise was that any argument in favour of an earlier Indian past would not be 'scientific' and would more damagingly be termed 'nationalistic'.

The radiocarbon dates kept on coming, and definitive evidence of pre-Sargonic Indus-Mesopotamia contact also emerged. The largest series of the relevant radiocarbon dates emerged from the American excavations at Harappa, and the American interpretation of these dates was that the mature Indus Civilization began around 2600 BC. The American scholars, while interpreting their series of dates, did not even mention the historical profile of Indus-Mesopotamia contact, which was used by earlier scholars. The point is that an archaeologist from the Netherlands, the late ECL During-Caspers, and I demonstrated, independently of each other, that the famous Royal Graves of Ur, which are securely dated about 2600 BC, contained two types of carnelian beads of indisputably Indus manufacture. There could not be a shadow of doubt that there was a trading relationship between the Indus and Mesopotamia by 2600 BC. Assuming that the Indus Civilization must have taken some time before organizing trade with an area as far as Mesopotamia or modern Iraq, I pushed its inception 100 years earlier, and put it at 2700 BC. This date makes

the beginnings of the Indus and Mesopotamian civilizations contemporary[3].

Most of the Indian scholars, including Upinder Singh's much-publicised textbook of ancient and early mediaeval India, prefer to cite the American date of 2600 BC. The reason is two-fold: first, unfamiliarity with the primary data and the consequent inability to assess various scholarly opinions critically, and secondly, a marked reluctance to accept an early date for anything Indian in the fear that their names would be associated with the BJP, or worse, with the RSS. My familiarity with the various shades of political opinion among Indian archaeologists convinces me that none of our political parties and organizations has a coherent and professional attitude to the Indian past, archaeological or otherwise. Interestingly, a centre for the study of the Indus Civilization, funded by an American organization called Global Heritage Fund, was proposed to be set up in Vadodara where in the persons of K.K. Bhan and Ajith Prasad who have worked with the Americans, Italians, Spaniards and Japanese with funds coming from the latter, there is already a right kind of situation. The focus has now reputedly shifted to Deccan College, Pune, where the role of Bhan and Prasad in Vadodara has been assumed by Vasant Shinde who also likes to go to the field with assistance from the Americans and the Japanese. It is apparent that the concerned Indians have apparently no idea of how such internationally funded heritage organizations can be used to manipulate the sense of the past in the Third World. Or, even if they are aware of this dimension, they are not simply bothered, as long as they can hope to derive some advantage out of it.[4]

As I began by talking about the date of the beginning of the Indus Civilization, let me talk a bit more about the Indus

chronology. How long did it continue? The answer is: 'up to about 1300 BC'. This date is suggested both by the radiocarbon dates and the finds of Indus seals in the Kassite levels of the Mesopotamian site of Nippur. The point is that instead of a thousand-year-old chronology, we have now got a 1400-year-old chronology, and this longer chronology, as we shall see later, has some important implications.

Did this civilization whose full-fledged form dates from *c.* 2700 BC have a prelude or ealier formative stages, and if so, has this evidence been found in the subcontinent? Two sites in Haryana—Kunal and Bhirrana, both near Fatehabad—have shown two such stages, one 'early Harappan', the trace of which has been found at many sites, and second, 'pre-early Harappan' or what scholars call ' the level of the Hakra Ware'. There is no radiocarbon date from Kunal but there are several from Bhirrana, some dating from the 4th, 5th and 6th millennia BC. To be honest, there are some uncertainties regarding their context, but I shall not hesitate to put the beginning of the Hakra Ware level at this site at least in the first half of the 4th millennium BC, possibly closer to 4000 than 3500 BC. Now, if we look at the whole dated profile, we shall realize that the archaeological cultural tradition represented by the Indus Civilization covers really a long and continuous span—a span of about 2500 years (tentatively, 3800 BC as the date of the Hakra level at Bhirrana, and *c.* 1300 BC as the date of the end of the Harappan tradition), if not more.

If the chronological column of the Indus Civilization is, according to my argument, at least 2500-year-long, one of the most obvious inferences is that it was more deeply rooted in the subcontinental soil than we had hitherto been prepared to admit. Secondly, the very fact that this tradition lasted so long, covering virtually the whole area between Jammu and Gujarat and between

Baluchistan and the outer front of the Siwaliks in Panjab, Haryana and western U.P., implies that it interacted with the areas around it. From Gujarat, for instance, the Malwa plain of central India is open, and the western U.P. is inextricably connected with the vast sweep of the Ganga plain. *To argue that the Indus Civilization had no special archaeological bearing on the archaeology of the subcontinent outside its distribution area has no meaning in the geographical sense. Similarly, to speak of a 'Ganga Civilization', completely separate from the Indus Civilization, does not have much meaning either.* In western U.P., between the Yamuna and the Siwaliks, the two traditions are known to have interacted. The occurrence of the Gangetic Valley 'copper hoards' in the otherwise Harappan assemblage of Sinauli near Baghpat is a major evidence of this interaction, and so is the interlocking of the Harappan and Painted Grey Ware levels at Alamgirpur near Meerat. I suspect that the painted pottery that one finds in Bulandshahr and Aligarh at some of the OCP sites is a part of the Harappan tradition, although it is not yet possible to be positive on this issue. One of the outstanding discoveries of the Harappan material in the Ganga Plain is the find of what Dr. Rakesh Tewari of Uttar Pradesh State Archaeological Organization calls a piece of indisputably Harappan perforated vessel in an apparently mixed assemblage in the recent excavations at Ramnagar opposite Varanasi.[5]

There is an attempt in the archaeological literature to disassociate, as far as possible, the Indus Civilization from modern India. J.M. Kenoyer's name for it in his *The Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Karachi, Oxford University Press) is the 'Indus Valley Civilization', which clearly carries the implication that it is primarily a product of the Indus Valley, all of which is in Pakistan. I find this erroneous term being freely used even in the Indian archaeology journals. I do not know if the Indians

who use this term are even aware of its implication. The term 'Indus-Sarasvati Civilization' is also wrong because it takes away the significance of the occurrence of the Indus sites in Gujarat and western U.P. The only logical terms are the Indus Civilization or the Harappan Civilization. The first excavated site of the civilization is Harappa.

Another related feature is the emphasis on what is called 'middle Asian interaction sphere' to explain the growth and appearance of the Indus Civilization. A convenient example of this emphasis is G.Possehl's *The Indus Civilization, a Contemporary Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland 2002: Alta Mira Press). The different kinds of interaction between the different components of the interaction zone between the Indus and the Oxus are well known, but the present archaeological data do not suggest that the growth of the Indus Civilization was due to this interaction. Among other things, this does not take into consideration the implication of the overwhelming number of Indus sites far to the east of the Indus. There is no doubt that the cultural sequence that has been unearthed at Kunal and Bhirrana, or for that matter, at Padri and Dholavira, is way beyond the Indus-Oxus orbit.

After the discovery of Mehrgarh in the Bolan Pass area of Baluchistan, the general tendency in the archaeological literature is to treat the Indus Civilization in a straight arrow-line of development beginning with the growth of wheat-barley agriculture in Baluchistan. Again, Possehl's book, which we have cited above, offers a ready example. The problem is that this notion downgrades, possibly wilfully, the role which the non-wheat-barley agricultural tradition to the east possibly played in the genesis of this civilization. Both rice and millets occur at several Early Harappan and Mature Harappan sites of Haryana and Panjab, including Harappa. These two crops are not known

to have been domesticated in Baluchistan. In the central Ganga plain and its Vindhyan fringe, the antiquity of rice cultivation goes back to the 7th millennium BC. The rice that one finds in the Early Harappan Haryana (Balu and Kunal) could have been only of eastern derivation. To relate the growth of the Indus Civilization only to the growth of wheat-barley agricultural tradition in Baluchistan is to imply that the growth of this Civilization is oriented to the West. This assumption ignores the multilineal character of its formation over a singularly large and diverse territory. Related to this trend is the current attempt by an American archaeobotanist to deny the presence of rice cultivation at Lohuradeva in the central Ganga Plain.[6]

A major archaeological fact disputing the notion of an exclusively Western orientation of the Indus Civilization is the growth of early agriculture and metallurgy along the Aravallis in Rajasthan. In my book *The Archaeology of Ancient Indian Cities* in 1995, I pointed out the probable role of the Aravalli metallurgical development in the genesis of the Mature Harappan Civilization, but regrettably, the whole issue has been ignored even by scholars who specialise in Rajasthan. For instance, in V.N. Misra's recent summation of the prehistoric and archaeological data from Rajasthan in his *Rajasthan: Prehistoric and Early Historic Foundations* (Delhi 2007: Aryan Books), there is no mention of this issue. On the other hand, the claim of the Aravalli system as an early and independent centre of agricultural origin is getting increasingly strong. First, we may consider the case of Bagor in Bhilwara. The fact that cattle, sheep and goat of Period I at Bagor were domesticated and the fact that the earliest chronological point of this period falls in the 6th millennium BC suggest the possibility of Bagor–I having an agricultural component. In the next period Bagor yielded copper implements,

of which the arrowhead is identical with the arrowhead type of the subsequently excavated site of Ganeshwar, located further up the Aravallis. In its first phase Ganeshwar was exclusively marked by microliths but possessed a number of copper tools in the next phase itself. It has not been generally realized that Bagor and Ganeshwar in two different sections of the Aravallis have the same archaeological sequence. It is likely that Ganeshwar–I and Bagor–I belonged to the same period, i.e. the 6th millennium BC and Ganeshwar also had an agricultural dimension like the latter site. The 6th millennium BC date for the so-called Mesolithic level in the Aravallis has also been highlighted by the mid-6th millennium BC date for a 60 cm thick Mesolithic deposit on the eastern face of Gilund-2 (Bhilwara district where Bagor also is situated). The issue needs further research, but what is intriguing is that the beginning of the chalcolithic occupation at Balathal in the same region has now been found to be about 3700 BC (calibrated). This implies a considerably earlier beginning of agriculture in the region, and as there is no reason to infer that this beginning was due to an infiltration from another area, one has to accept that this suggests an independent beginning of agriculture and metallurgy in the Aravalli zone[7].

The attempts to disassociate the Indus tradition from the later Indian heritage have also taken other forms. Those familiar with John Marshall's discussion on the Indus sculpture in *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization* (1931) will recall that the entire framework of that discussion was in terms of the 'Indianness' of the relevant specimens, and he worked out this 'Indianness' by pointing out the stylistic and conceptual similarities between the Indus sculptural objects and some examples of later Indian sculptures. It is this postulated link which is being currently questioned.

The famous 'priest-king' head and torso from Mohenjo-daro has been compared first with some specimens from Bactria and then with various other sundry representations from West Asia (cf. Ardeleanu-Jansen). This exercise has been singularly unedifying. Even if one assumes that the priest-king figure was a part of a seated image, the whole concept and representation of this image is completely different from the examples which have been cited from Bactria and other central and West Asiatic places. That the figure suggested the concept of a *Yogi* wrapped in meditation with his eyes fixed on the top of his nose was pointed out in detail by R.P. Chanda soon after its discovery at Mohenjo-daro. The problem with the study of Indus sculptural tradition is that very few specimens have so far been found, and that too primarily from two sites, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. One gets only occasional flickers of the fact that the spread of the Indus tradition was possibly more deep-rooted and widespread than we admit, in such discoveries as that of a stone monitor lizard or *Godhika* at Dholavira and the incised outline of the Mohenjo-daro 'dancing girl' on a potsherd at Bhirrana. That the iconographic tradition of this civilization was diverse is clear from the representations of sundry human figures on its seals. This tradition is also overwhelmingly 'Indian' in the sense that they can be explained in terms of the later and mostly current ritual beliefs.

This leads us to the question of the Indus religion. Many scholars, both foreign and Indian, are very reluctant to find any trace of modern Hindu rituals and beliefs in the finds which have been interpreted as evidence of Indus religion. Two facts, however, cannot be wished away—regrettably from the point of view of this group of people. One is the indubitable presence of

Siva in the form of *linga*-like stones found both at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, a distinctively phallic stone column at Dholavira, a seated ithyphallic stone figure from the same site, the famous 'Siva-Pasupati' figure on a seal, and the terracotta representation of a *Sivalinga* set in *Yonipatta* at Kalibangan. The second such evidence is the widespread presence of sacrificial pits at Lothal, Kalibangan, Banawali, Rakhigarhi and possibly a few other sites. These pits possibly have variations of their own. Their shapes and contents may also vary from site to site. However, their generic similarity with the 'havan kundas' which many devout people still dig up every day, light fire in, and pour offerings on, is undeniable.

Again, one has only to look up the section on religion in *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization* to find the footprints of later day Hinduism in the ruins of the Indus Civilization. I shall not argue that Hinduism in its modern forms flourished there. All that I would say that the roots of some major Hindu religious beliefs and rituals can be traced back to that period. As far as the early scholars were concerned, that was obvious. Even to people like me, that is the most simple and straightforward explanation of the category of artefacts which have been found at the Indus sites and can be associated with religion and ritual beliefs. Doubts have been expressed in the modern context because there are scholars who will not like to see the continuation of Hinduism in any form from this early period.

In a small but important volume entitled *The Sarasvati Flows On: the Continuity of Indian Culture*, (Delhi: Aryan Books, 2002), the seniormost archaeologist of the country, B.B. Lal, has offered an outline of the various traits of Indian behaviour which have continued from the protohistoric times to the present. Even outside this book some major examples can be given. For

instance, one has only to look up the list of the plant-remains found at the Indus sites to realize that the agricultural pattern of the subcontinent has been reflected in that list. The general idea is that the Indus people were not familiar with irrigation and depended on the over-bank floods of the Indus to sow their crops. There was certainly some dependence on the river floods of the rivers during that period, but a far more probable hypothesis in the light of modern but pre-industrial agricultural practices in Sindh is that canal irrigation was used. The practice of both double-cropping and irrigation was there, and I have been trying to argue this since 1988 *(Theroretical Issues in Indian Archaeology*, Delhi 1988: Munshiram Manoharlal) but without any effect on the mindset of Indus specialists. Regarding Harappan technology, especially regarding Harappan metal technology, it has been convincingly argued by Nayanjot Lahiri that the preference for pure copper products in the range of Harappan metal objects may be explained by the general preference for ritually pure copper materials in modern India[8]. The point is that it is no reflection on the technological status of Harappan metallurgy that many of its specimens were unalloyed.

In the general field of Indus technological studies, a noteworthy development in recent years is to analyse the technical skills involved in various crafts by employing village craftsmen to replicate them. The knowledge imparted by the traditional craftsmen is couched in terms of modern science, and by the time the process results in publications, the village craftsmen are forgotten and in their place we find modern 'western' scientists trying to lay down laws on the Indus crafts. This tendency has become dominant after the American excavations at Harappa under Kenoyer. Such studies are no doubt useful but provide an

excellent example of how the traditional crafts of the subcontinent can be appropriated by 'western science'.

At this point, it may be apt to point out how the study of the Indus Civilization itself is being appropriated by 'western science'. In June 2008, the American magazine *Science* published a lengthy article in several sections on the Indus Civilization. The sections numbered six and carried the following headings: (1) Unmasking the Indus: boring no more, a trade-savvy Indus emerges; (2) Unmasking the Indus: Buddhist stupa or Indus temple?; (3) Unmasking the Indus: Indus collapse: the end or the beginning of an Asian culture? (4) Understanding the Indus: trench warfare: modern borders split the Indus; (5) Understanding the Indus: trying to make way for the old; (6) Unmasking the Indus: Pakistani archaeology faces issues old and new.

As excavators two Indian names—V. Shinde and R.S. Bisht, both well-known associates of the American scholars G. Possehl and J.M. Kenoyer—and three Pakistani names–Qasid Mallah, Farzand Massih and G.M. Veesar—have been cited; otherwise the essay cites as 'scholars' only Americans. The title of the sections is, to us, academically meaningless. That the Indus Civilization was, as the writer put it, 'trade-savvy' has been known since its discovery and in 1931 its internal and external trade were comprehensively discussed. That there is a possibility of finding an Indus religious place below the ruins of the Buddhist stupa in the northeastern corner of the western mound of Mohenjo-daro was pointed out as early as 1931. The issue of the Indus decline has also been discussed for ages. That Indian and Pakistani archaeologists do not work together is well known, but to put the record straight, there is no 'trench warfare' between them. Research is a continuous process, and one is not sure why 2008 should mark a point when old ideas regarding the Indus are giving

way to the new. Archaeologists anywhere face both old and new issues, and one does not understand the reason of particular emphasis with reference to Pakistani archaeologists. The article states that Mehrgarh was the precursor of the Indus Civilization and that the Indus cities at 2600 BC were 600 years later than those of Mesopotamia, simply forgetting to mention the fact that some early Harappan settlements dating from before 3000 BC were fortified, planned and could be considered cities, especially in view of the fact that the Indus writing had made its appearance by then. Equally interestingly, he approvingly cites the Italian archaeologist G. Verardi's idea that the Buddhist stupa at the northeastern corner of the western mound at Harappa was not a stupa but only a series of platforms on the model of the Sumerian ziggurat, an idea which fits perfectly with Wheeler's idea that there was a strong Mesopotamian impetus to the growth of the Indus Civilization. Incidentally, this stupa structure was investigated by two of India's foremost early archaeologists, R.D. Banerjee and D.R. Bhandarkar, and I have no reason to believe that they did not recognize a Buddhist stupa when they saw one.

Most amazingly, considering that the articles figured in *Science*, the author, A. Lawler, allowed himself some comments on the domestic politics of India:

> The rise of Hindu nationalism in today's India has thrust this scholarly debate into the political spotlight. Hindu nationalists' push to see the roots of their religion in the 5000-year-old Indus civilization creates another barrier between Indian archaeologists and their mostly Muslim counterparts in Pakistan.... The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which ruled India from 1998 to 2004 declared the Indus to be progenitor of Hindu civilization, a controversial claim in a country with a large Muslim

> population. While in power, BJP pumped additional funding into Indus-related digs, and its influence over archaeological matters remains strong.

I agree with the last part of the author's comment. The BJP's influence over Indian archaeological matters must be strong because otherwise how an American-funded Indus Centre with J.M. Kenoyer on board is being set up in Gujarat with the support of its BJP government? Regarding the author's statement that the BJP "declared the Indus to be progenitor of Hindu Civilization", all that one can point out is that it is not usual for any political party in India to declare anything as the progenitor of any aspect of the Indian civilization, nor are they known to make such statements. Lawler's political comments go deeper. Citing Bisht's 'opinion' that the Indus people were 'one and the same with the Aryans', he writes that this 'theory finds little support among foreign scholars'. This attempt to put Indian scholarship vis-à-vis foreign scholarship has long been an important ingredient of Western scholarship on ancient India.

The idea that the Indus Civilization could bear an echo of the Vedic tradition has taken deeper roots in the recent period after it was understood that the densest distribution of the Indus Civilization sites was not along the Indus but along the Hakra which was a part of a river-system parallel to that of the Indus. This river-system has been known to modern scholarship since the late 18th century, and the Ghaggar-Hakra was identified with the Vedic Sarasvati by the French historical geographer L. Vivien de Saint-Martin (1802–1896) possibly in 1860 in his book on the study of the Vedic geography. By 1830, the general archaeological potential of its valley was also understood. The idea that the Indus Civilization and the Vedic tradition could

not have been poles apart was perfectly acceptable to scholars like R.P. Chanda, M.S. Vats, B.N. Datta and possibly most significantly, P.V. Kane. They did not discuss the issue from the point of view of modern politics. I do not know the political opinion of Chanda and Vats, but B.N. Datta was one of the forerunners of communist movement in India and, hopefully, P.V. Kane, *Bharatratna*, will not be accused of being a 'Hindu nationalist'. According to Datta, "in religious matters, the present-day Hindus are the descendants of the Indus valley people". Kane, in fact, wrote that the Rigvedic people were earlier than the Indus valley people" and that there was some evidence to believe that the Indus Valley people "were probably Aryans " or different but "contemporaneous with the Rigveda Aryans". I have cited these scholars only to show that the problem was not always tinged with political implications as it is now[9].

People who are very keen to insert a phase of Aryan invasions between the Indus Civilization and the later historic India would prefer to view Hinduism as Aryan in inspiration. This would mean, by implication, that Hinduism is as much native to the Indian soil as the much later immigrant religions like Islam and Christianity. If this belief gives a section of Indian people and what Lawler calls 'foreign scholars', happiness and peace, they are welcome to it. However, this should not be a deterrent on viewing the formative phase of Indian history in the light of the increasingly supportive archaeological data that there is no break in the continuity of Indian archaeological record since prehistory. As I wrote in 2004, "all the people of the subcontinent are, in one way or another, the inheritors of the Indus civilization"[10]. The Indian past represented by this civilization belongs to them.

I conclude this essay by pointing out a danger which is increasingly facing Indian archaeology today. If one goes through the archaeological literature on Egypt and Mesopotamia, the areas where Western scholarship has been paramount since the beginning of archaeological research in those areas, one notes that the contribution made by the native Egyptian and Iraqi archaeologists is completely ignored in that literature. The Bronze Age past of Egypt, Mesoptamia and the intervening region is completely appropriated by the Western scholarship. Also, when Western archaeologists write on Pakistani archaeology, they seldom mention the contribution made by the Pakistani archaeologists themselves. There are exceptions but they are very rare. After Independence, the Archaeological Survey of India pursued a policy of relative isolation, which enabled archaeology as a subject to develop in the country and helped Indian archaeologists to find their feet. The policy seems to be changing now, and supercilious articles like the one by Lawler are an indication of the effect of this change. There is a great deal of arrogance and sense of superiority in that segment of the First World archaeology which specializes in the Third World. Unless this segment of the First World archaeology changes its way and attitude, it should be treated with a great deal of caution in the Third World.

As a British author, William Dalrymple, possibly well known in Delhi, is supposed to have commented in an interview to the Channel 4 of the British television, "One should protect one's own history and fight for it by tooth and claw, as others will always try to change it".

PS. An important point that I have made in this paper is that there is a complete appropriation of the Bronze Age past of

Egypt, Mesopotamia and the intervening region by the Western scholarship. This also includes Pakistan where the Western scholars, even while writing on Pakistan archaeology, seldom mention the contribution made by the Pakistani archaeologists themselves.

This point has recently been driven home once again by what is reported of the Indus Civilization in *Science* under the heading "the ingredients for a 4000-year-old proto-curry" (20 JULY 2012 VOL 337 SCIENCE www.sciencemag.org). The occasion is the identification of cooked ginger and turmeric in human teeth at Farmana and of banana phytoliths from the same site. The author of the note, A. Lawler, does not mention it, but the first item of the ingredient of a curry in the Indus context was reported by an Indian worker, K.S. Saraswat, and it was fenugreek or *methi*, from Kunal. One is surprised by Lawler's emphasis on the occurrence of rice at Masudpur because rice was found much earlier at Kunal and Balu by the same Indian worker. The fact which possibly makes Masudpur rice significant from Lawler's point of view is that it was identified by a (white) Cambridge archaeologist with the name Bates ! He also makes a great deal of the point that Bates' work suggests that both summer and winter cropping were practised by the Masudpur people. The point that the Harappans prastised double-cropping was made by a (brown/ black) Cambridge archaeologist with the name Chakrabarti in 1988 in his book *Theoretical Issues in Indian Archaeology*.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Sandra Scham. Diplomacy and Desired Pasts. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 9(2), 2009: 163-99.
2. Cf. N. Ferries. Between Colonial and Indigenous Archaeologies: Legal and Extra-Legal Ownership of the Archaeological Past in

North America. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 27(2), 2003: 154-90; D. Ritchie, Principles and Practice of Site Protection Laws in Australia. In D. Charmichael, J. Hubert, B. Reeves, and A. Schanche (eds.), *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places.* London, 1994: Routledge, pp. 227-44.

3. There is a detailed discussion on Harappan chronology with a historiographical survey of the various estimates and their basis in D. Chakrabarti, *The Archaeology of the Ancient Indian Cities.* Delhi 1995: Oxford University Press.
4. The details of the proposed Indus Centre can be easily located in the web-pages of 'Global Heritage Fund'.
5. For the archaeological details, D. Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology*. Delhi 2006: Oxford University Press; I owe my information on the interlocking of Harappan and Painted Grey Ware levels at Alamgirpur to Dr. R.N. Singh of BHU, and I owe my information on the find of a Harappan perforated ware vessel at Ramnagar to Dr. Rakesh Tewari, Director of U.P. State Archaeology.
6. Regarding Lohuradeva rice, the following is the comment of Dorian Fuller in 'archaeobotanist blog', section: Indian archaeobotany watch: Lohuradewa 2008: "I now doubt even more, that the rice was domesticated. It is not even clear that it was cultivated, and is plausibly (perhaps safest interpreted as) wild gathered". Among other things, rice occurs at the site in the 7th-6th millennia BC context as plastering material in mud plaster. Those who have seen the practice in modern Indian villages will know that this practice itself implies a long and close familiarity with rice agriculture. Is there any context where wild rice occurs extensively in mud plaster?
7. The data are cited in detail in D. Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology* (Delhi 2006: Oxford University Press).

8. N. Lahiri. Indian Metal and Metal-related Artefacts as Cultural Signifiers: An Ethnographic Perspective. *World Archaeology* 27 (1) 1995, pp. 116-32.
9. This literature has been surveyed in D. Chakrabarti, *The Battle for Ancient India*. Delhi 2008: Aryan Books.
10. D. Chakrabarti (ed.). *Indus Civilization Sites in India: New Discoveries*. Mumbai 2004: Marg Publications.

2

THE GREAT ANCIENT EMPIRES

THE RISE OF THE GANGETIC CULTURE AND THE GREAT EMPIRES OF THE EAST

The extension of the Vedic culture into the central and eastern Gangetic plains was as important for the further course of Indian history as the period of their early settlement in the Panjab and in the Ganga–Yamuna Doab. The penetration of the east very soon led to the emergence of the first historical kingdoms and to a second phase of urbanisation – the first phase being that of the Indus civilisation.

It is generally assumed that the eastward migration of the Vedic population was caused by a change of climate. The fertile area in Panjab and Doab became more and more arid and, at the same time, the Gangetic jungles receded and thus became penetrable. The ancient texts show that the tribes were constantly fighting for pasture and agricultural land. In the Brahmana texts, it is stated quite unequivocally that only he who fights on two fronts can establish a settlement successfully, because if he fights on only one front, the land which he has acquired will surely be taken over by the next of the migrating groups. Thus there was continuous warfare both against the indigenous people and against other Vedic tribes.

A further motivation for the movement east may have been escape from royal supremacy and a desire to preserve their earlier republican organisation by settling where the new kings did not yet have power. Heterodox groups and sodalities like the Vratyas which are mentioned in the Atharvaveda may have played an important role in this movement. It is interesting to note that Buddhist texts contain many references to powerful tribal republics which existed in the east in the fifth century BC while the Brahmana texts which originated in the western part of Vedic settlements refer mostly to kingdoms.

Not very much is known so far about the time and the direction of these movements beyond Kurukshetra. There are early references to movements south: 'The people move victoriously to the south.'[1] Avanti, with its capital at Ujjain about 500 miles south of Kurukshetra, was one of the earliest

outposts in central India and it showed traces of incipient urbanisation as early as about 700 BC. But groups of Vedic Aryans also moved north. A Brahmana text says: 'Whenever a father resettles a son, he settles him in the north.'[2] Probably those who went north did not stop at the foot of the Himalayas but moved east along the foothills. Indian historians maintain that this route was perhaps one of the earliest passages to the east because there was less jungle there and the many tributaries of the Yamuna and the Ganga could be more easily crossed upstream than down in the plains.

The penetration of the east

The movement east was certainly the most important one. In a text it is clearly stated: 'The people move from the west to the east and conquer land.'[3] It is essential to note that the term for land in this quote is *kshetra* which refers to fields fit for cultivation. There is also a highly instructive text in the Shatapatha Brahmana, the 'Brahmana of the Hundred Paths', which throws light on the extension of the late Vedic civilisation into the eastern Gangetic plains. This text reports the founding of a realm called Videha to the northeast of Patna by a prince, Videgha-Mathava. This prince is said to have started from the river Saraswati in the company of the fire god, Agni-Vaishvanara, of whose fame as a great coloniser we have heard already. Videgha followed him until they came to the river Sadanira (this is now the river Gandak). Here Agni stopped and did not proceed. The text[4] describes this episode very vividly:

> Mathava, the Videgha, was at that time on the [river] Sarasvati. He [Agni] thence went burning along this earth towards the East . . . and the Videgha Mathava followed after him as he was burning along. He burnt over [dried up] all these rivers. Now that [river], which is called Sadanira, flows from the northern [Himalaya] mountains: that one he did not burn over. That one the Brahmins did not cross in former times, thinking, 'it has not been burnt over by Agni Vaishvanara'.
>
> Nowadays, however, there are many Brahmins in the East of it. At that time it [the land east of the Sadanira] was very uncultivated, very marshy, because it had not been tasted by Agni Vaishvanara.
>
> Nowadays, however, it is very cultivated, for the Brahmins have caused [Agni] to taste it through sacrifices. Even in late summer that [river] . . . rages along . . .
>
> Mathava the Videgha then said [to Agni] 'Where am I to abide?' 'To the East of this [river] be thy abode!' said he. Even now this [river] forms the boundary of the Koshalas and Videhas.

The events reported here are of great significance. At the time when this text was composed there was obviously still a clear recollection that the land to the east of the river Sadanira (Gandak) was originally unclean to the Brahmins because their great god Agni had not traversed this river. Prince Videgha had nevertheless conquered this country. The term *etarhi* used in the text means 'now' and is obviously a reference to the state of affairs at the time of writing. So, by the time this Brahmana text was written (in approximately the eighth century BC) this land was considered to be acceptable to the Brahmins. But, because the god of the Brahmins had not stepped into this land, it was considered to be inferior to the land in the west. Because of its strong elements of an already highly developed indigenous chalcolithic culture and society this part of the country was suspect and impure to orthodox Brahmins even in the mid-first millennium BC. We can therefore only endorse the statement made by Hermann Oldenberg in his book on Buddhism which was first published in 1881: 'When we think about the origins of Buddhism we must keep in mind that the earliest Buddhist congregations were located in the country or at least at the border of the country into which Agni-Vaishvanara had not crossed on his way to the East, exuding flames.'

Archaeological research sheds more light on the establishment of a Gangetic culture than the stray textual references which cannot be accurately dated. Since India attained independence the Archaeological Survey of India has made great efforts to excavate the early historical cities of northern India. The dating of some sites is still open to debate but there is a consensus that the period from the late seventh to the late fifth century BC was a most decisive phase for the development of Indian culture. It may well be said that the history of the Indian subcontinent actually started at that time.

In this period the first territorial kingdoms were established in the central part of the Gangetic plains, northern India witnessed a second phase of urbanisation, and those parts of the subcontinent which are now included in Pakistan were annexed by the Persian emperor, Dareios the Great. At the end of this period the first historical personality of India, Gautama Buddha, stepped into the limelight of history.

From the numerous small tribal kingdoms (*janapada*) sixteen major ones (*mahajanapada*) emerged in the fifth century BC (see Map 1.2). The emergence of these principalities had a lot to do with agrarian extension, control of trade routes and a new and more aggressive type of warfare. The texts do not necessarily always use the same name for each of these mahajanapadas, but it is possible to list the most important ones which have also been documented by archaeological research. These are: Kamboja and Gandhara located in northern Pakistan; Kuru, Surasena (capital: Mathura) and Panchala in the western Doab; Vatsa (capital: Kausambi) in the eastern Doab; Kasi (capital: Varanasi) and to the north of it, Koshala; Magadha to

the south of Patna and the tribal republics of the Mallas and Vrijis to the north of it; and farther east, Anga, near the present border between Bihar and Bengal; in central India there was Avanti (capital: Ujjain) and to the east of it Chetiya. The hub of this whole system of mahajanapadas was the Ganga–Yamuna Doab and the immediately adjacent region to the east.

The origins and the internal organisation of these mahajanapadas are still a matter for speculation. As the earlier tribes were usually rather small, all the inhabitants of a mahajanapada could not have belonged to the tribe that gave it its name. Therefore, they must have been confederations of several tribes. Some of these mahajanapadas had two capitals which seems to be evidence for a fusion of at least two smaller units: Hastinapura and Indraprastha were both located in the land of the Kurus, and Panchala included Kampila and Ahicchatra. The structure of these states was perhaps similar to that of later medieval Hindu kingdoms: the direct exercise of royal power was restricted to the immediate tribal surroundings while other principalities belonging to the kingdom enjoyed a great deal of internal autonomy. The heads of these principalities only joined the king in warfare and plunder and they participated in his royal ceremonies. The only definite borders of such mahajanapadas were rivers and other natural barriers. The extension of royal authority depended on the loyalty of the border tribes which were also able to be influenced by neighbouring kingdoms.

Urbanisation in the Ganges valley

The rise of the mahajanapadas was directly connected with the emergence of the early urban centres of the Gangetic plains in the period after 600 BC. Five of the six major cities in the central Gangetic plains were capitals of mahajanapadas: Rajagriha (Magadha), Varanasi (Kasi), Kausambi (Vatsa), Sravasti (Koshala) and Champa (Anga). Only the sixth city, Saketa, was not an independent capital but was located in Koshala. It must have been the centre of an earlier janapada which merged with Koshala. In central India there was Ujjain (Avanti) and in the northwest there was Taxila (Gandhara) or rather the recently discovered early town which preceded both Taxila and the nearby township on the Bhir Mound which dates back to the period of Persian occupation around 500 BC. There seems to be a correlation between political development and urbanisation in this period of the sixth to the fifth centuries BC.

The most remarkable contrast between the new cities in the Gangetic plains and earlier towns like Hastinapura is that of the system of fortification. Whereas the earlier towns were not fortified, these new cities had moats and ramparts. The ramparts were made of earth which was covered in some cases with bricks from about the fifth century BC onward; later on they were even replaced by solid brick walls. A millennium after the decline of the Indus civilisation, one encounters once more bricks made in kilns.

Kausambi had the most impressive fortification, its city walls are about 4 miles long and at some places 30 feet high. The archaeologist G.R. Sharma, who excavated Kausambi in the 1950s, thought that these walls resembled those of the Indus cities. There were also public buildings like assembly halls in these early Gangetic cities, and after the rise of Buddhism they also contained monasteries and stupas. City planning with regard to the network of streets seems to have started again only in the fourth century BC.

An important indicator of the growth of an urban economy are the punch-marked coins which have been found in those Gangetic cities. There were also standardised weights which provide evidence for a highly developed trade in the fifth century BC. Was there perhaps some cultural continuity right from the time of the Indus civilisation down to this new Gangetic civilisation? This question cannot yet be answered, but it is interesting to note that the weight of 95 per cent of the 1,150 silver coins found at Taxila is very similar to the standardised stone weights of the Indus civilisation.

There was a great demand in this period of the Gangetic civilisation for a new type of ceramic referred to as 'Northern Black Polished Ware'. The centre of production of this was in the Gangetic plains. Just as the earlier Painted Grey Ware was identified with the period of Late Vedic settlement in Panjab and Doab, this new type of ceramic shows the spread of the Gangetic civilisation and its influence on other parts of India opened up by the many new trade routes. Northern Black Polished Ware made its first appearance around 500 BC and could be traced in all the mahajanapadas mentioned above; it even showed up in distant Kalinga (see Map 1.2). In 1981 a city was discovered and partly excavated in western Orissa, which was about 1 mile long and 500 yards wide, surrounded by a solid brick wall. At this site Northern Black Polished Ware was also discovered.

Another important indicator for a well-developed urban culture, a script, has not yet been found in those Gangetic cities. Ashoka's inscriptions of the third century BC still remain the earliest evidence for an Indian script. But since the two scripts Brahmi and Karoshthi were already fully developed, scholars believe that they may have originated in the fifth century BC. Script in India developed probably for the first time under Persian influence. The Persians held sway in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent at that time and Karoshthi, which was written from right to left, was based on the Aramaic script which was the official script of the Persian empire.

The rise of Buddhism

This new Gangetic civilisation found its spiritual expression in a reform movement which was a reaction to the Brahmin–Kshatriya alliance of the Late Vedic age. This reform movement is mainly identified with the teaching of Gautama Buddha who is regarded as the first historic figure

of Indian history. The date of his death (*parinirvana*) has always been a controversial issue. Whereas the Buddhist world celebrated in AD 1956 the 2,500th anniversary of his Nirvana (in 544 BC), modern historians and Indologists had generally accepted *c*.483 BC as the date of his death. But in the early 1980s the German Indologist H. Bechert has convincingly shown that none of these dates which are based on later Buddhist chronicles and canonical texts can be taken for granted and that the Buddha may instead have lived and preached about a century later. These findings were generally approved at an international conference at Göttingen in 1988 even though they are not unanimously accepted, especially by Indian historians. As early Buddhist literature, in particular the Jataka stories of the Buddha's previous lives, depict an already flourishing urban society in north India, archaeological evidence also seems to indicate that the Buddha lived in the fifth rather than in the sixth century when urbanisation in the Ganges valley was still in its incipient stage. The Buddha, however, was not the only great reformer of that age. There was also Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, who is supposed to have been a younger contemporary of the Buddha. Jainism, this other great ascetic religion, was destined to have an unbroken tradition in India, especially in the rich merchant communities of western India. Buddhism spread to many other countries later on, but has declined in India itself. It could be said that Mahavira's teachings reappeared in the rigorous ethics of Mahatma Gandhi who was influenced by Jainism as he grew up in a Gujarati Bania family, the Banias being a dominant traders' caste in that region.

Both these ascetic religious movements of the fifth century BC are characterised by a transition from the magic thought of the Vedas and the mystical speculations of the Upanishads to a new type of rationality. This rationality is also in evidence in the famous grammar of the great Indian linguist, Panini. His grammar, India's first scientific treatise, was produced in this period. Buddha's teachings were later on fused once more with mystical speculation and even with magic thought in Tantric Buddhism, but his original quest for rationally enlightened experience is clearly documented by this explanation of the four noble truths, and of the 'eightfold path' of salvation from the burden of human suffering. He had practised penance and experienced the futility of mystical speculation before he arrived at his insight into the causes of human suffering and the way to remove them. The eightfold path of right conduct (in vision, thought, speech, action, giving, striving, vigilance and concentration) which leads to a cessation of the thirst for life and thus stops the cycle of rebirths appears to be a matter of practical instruction rather than the outcome of mystical speculation.

The voluminous Buddhist scriptures throw a flood of light on the life and times of Gautama Buddha. He was born as the son of a Sakhya prince in a region which now belongs to Nepal. He left his family at the age of

29 and spent many years as a wandering ascetic until he experienced his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. He then preached his first sermon at Sarnath near Varanasi and toured many parts of what is now Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, spreading his teachings and gaining more and more followers. He met the high and mighty of his time – among them King Bimbisara of Magadha.

After his death, a council of 500 Buddhist monks was convened at Rajagriha in order to edit the corpus of his sermons so that his authentic teachings could be preserved. A second council, convened at Vaishali, witnessed a schism: the 'old ones' (*theravadins*) insisted on the ascetic ideal of the community of monks (*sangha*), whereas a new movement stood for a greater accommodation of the lay members and a broadening of the concept of the sangha to include followers other than monks. In keeping with this aim, the new trend was called Mahasanghika. This was the origin of the 'Great Vehicle' (*mahayana*) as the new movement liked to call itself while looking down upon the 'Small Vehicle' (*hinayana*) of the orthodox monks. This schism was undoubtedly of great importance for the later development of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, but it also predetermined the decline of Buddhism in India itself.

The west under Persian domination

In the sixth century BC, the Persian kingdom of the Achaemenids emerged within a few decades as the first major empire in recorded history. Kyros, the founder of this empire, is said to have sent an expedition to Afghanistan which reached the borders of India, but the conquest of northwestern India was left to Dareios (521 to 485 BC). In the famous inscription of Behistun (*c*.518 BC), he mentions Gandhara as a province of his empire. Other inscriptions add Hindush (Sindh) to this list of provinces only a few years later. The river Indus, which had already been explored by Skylax, a Greek in Persian service, thus had become the border of the Persian empire.

Not much is known about the administration of these Persian provinces on the banks of the Indus, but Herodotus reports that these regions (Indoi) provided the greatest amount of revenue to the Persian empire. This would indicate that under Dareios and Xerxes these regions were thoroughly subjected to Persian administration. News about this altogether novel style of administration must have reached Magadha, whose rulers were on the verge of founding the first major empire on Indian soil. But it is difficult to gauge the extent of Persian influence on Indian history because archaeological evidence is missing and the gold coins of the Achaemenids have not been found in India so far. Only the towns of the Bhir Mound at Taxila and Charsada, west of it, are attributed to the Achaemenids, but no distinctively Persian features have been noted by the archaeologists excavating those sites.

The origins of the early state

A new phase of political development began in the eastern Gangetic plains in the times of Dareios and Buddha. Some of the mahajanapadas of this region established their hegemony over others in the fifth century BC. There emerged a kind of strategic quadrangle: Koshala and the tribal confederation of the Vrijis held sway north of the Ganga; Vatsa, with its capital Kausambi, dominated the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna; and Magadha ruled the large region southeast of the Ganga.

Koshala and Magadha followed a particularly aggressive policy which was not only aimed at victory over their neighbours but at annexation of their territory as well. Bimbisara of Magadha seems to have started this struggle. During his long reign he laid the foundations for the rise of Magadha as the greatest power in India. An important step towards this aim was the conquest of neighbouring Anga. In this way Magadha could greatly enhance its control over the trade routes of the eastern plains and perhaps also gain access to the trade of the east coast. Bimbisara built a more magnificent capital at New Rajagriha to commemorate his supremacy. There he is also supposed to have met Buddha who converted him to his teachings. Bimbisara died a miserable death, his son Ajatashatru imprisoned and starved him.

Ajatashatru continued the aggressive policy of his father, but soon suffered defeat at the hands of his uncle, the king of Koshala. But this king was soon removed by his own son, Virudhaka. Koshala and Magadha then fought against the northern tribal republics. Koshala vanquished the tribe of the Sakhya, to which Buddha belonged. From then on Koshala held sway from Varanasi to the foothills of the Himalayas.

Magadha's warfare against the strong tribal confederation of the Vrijis is supposed to have continued for fourteen years, and it is said that Buddha himself advised Ajatashatru against starting this war. Magadha for the first time used heavy chariots that were armoured and catapults for hurling huge stones against the enemies in this war. In order to wage war more effectively two generals of Magadha fortified a village, Pataligrama, on the banks of the river Ganga, which soon rose into prominence under its new name Pataliputra (Patna). Vaishali, the capital of the Licchavis, the strongest tribe of the Vriji confederation, is highly praised in Buddhist literature. Its splendour and its multi-storey houses are specifically mentioned. The city is said to have been governed by the assembly of the heads of its 7,707 families who all proudly called themselves rajas. When Ajatashatru had barely established his hegemony over the Gangetic plains he was challenged by King Pradyota of Ujjain (Avanti) in western India who even conquered Kausambi and held it for some time. But Magadha was already so powerful that such challenges could not dislodge it any more from its eminent position.

The meteoric rise of Magadha within the lifetime of two generations has remained an enigma to all historians who have tried to explain the origins of ancient India's first empire. The main problem is not the sudden emergence of a successful dynasty – Indian history is replete with such success stories – but the fact that a vast state of hitherto unprecedented dimensions was born at the periphery of the Gangetic civilisation without any recognisable period of gestation. Historians who believe in the theory of diffusion of imperial state formation from a centre in Western Asia point to the fact that the rise of Magadha closely paralleled the Persian conquest of north-western India. The knowledge of the new style of imperial administration practised in the Persian provinces on the river Indus must have spread to eastern India, too. But the availability of this knowledge would not suffice to explain the actual rise of Magadha. We have to delve back into India's history in the seventh and sixth centuries BC in order to find clues for the emergence of this new type of state formation.

Early state formation in India usually proceeded in three phases. In the Gangetic region the first phase of this process was characterised by the transition of the small semi-nomadic tribes (*jana*) of the period of Vedic migration to a large number of tribal principalities of a definite area (*janapada*). During the second phase in a period of competition sixteen major mahajanapadas emerged in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC. The third or imperial phase was reached when one of these mahajanapadas (in this case, Magadha) annexed a few neighbouring principalities and established its hegemony over the others. This three-phase development can be considered as an autochthonous evolution, especially since the first two phases are certainly not due to external influences. They were accompanied by a marked social and political change in the Gangetic civilisation, and it is this change which contributed to the emergence of the empire in the third phase.

Indian Marxist historians insist that the introduction of iron implements in the seventh century BC, which enabled the people to clear the jungle and reclaim the fertile land of the eastern Gangetic plains, led to the rise of the powerful mahajanapadas and finally to the emergence of the great eastern empire. But hitherto there has been little archaeological evidence and there are only a few references in the ancient texts which would clearly support this Marxist thesis of economic change as the main reason for the rise of Magadha. Iron, however, must have indeed played an important yet different role in this period. But it seems that even in this period iron was mostly used for the making of weapons and Magadha may have had a strategic advantage due to its access to the deposits of iron ore in Chota Nagpur and its better armament. Thus it was perhaps no accident that Magadha's first great campaign was directed against neighbouring Anga which was equally close to these deposits of iron ore and perhaps controlled the trade routes through which iron would reach northern India. In this way, Magadha eliminated the most dangerous competitor at the very beginning of its imperial career.

The period of Ajatashatru's successors is not very well documented as yet. Buddhist texts refer to the four rulers who followed him as parricides just as he himself and his contemporary Virudhaka, the king of Koshala, were accused of that crime. These reports may not have been completely reliable but they seem to indicate that a new type of unscrupulous and ambitious ruler emerged at that time. This type was then succinctly described in the famous book on statecraft, Kautalya's *Arthashastra*. Among the rulers of Magadha, Shishunaga deserves special attention because he defeated the Prayota dynasty of Avanti, a major threat to Magadha for quite some time, and annexed its territories of Avanti and Kausambi. In the reign of Shishunaga's son Kakavarna the second Buddhist council was held which has been mentioned above. Kakavarna was assassinated and this time even one of the queens is supposed to have contributed to the violent death of the king.

The usurper who emerged from this intrigue as the new ruler of Magadha was Mahapadma who founded the short-lived but very important Nanda dynasty. Mahapadma was the son of a Shudra woman and later Purana texts refer to him as the destroyer of the Kshatriyas – obviously a reference both to his low birth and his victories over the kings of northern India. Mahapadma energetically continued the aggressive policies of his predecessors. He subjugated most of northern India, parts of central India and even Kalinga on the east coast. He rates as the greatest Indian ruler before the Mauryas and in the royal lists of the Puranas he is the first who bears the imperial title *Ekachattra*, meaning 'he who has united the country under one umbrella', the symbol of overlordship.

Greek and Roman authors report that the Nandas, who had their capital at Pataliputra when Alexander the Great conquered northwestern India, had a powerful standing army of 200,000 infantrymen, 20,000 horsemen, 2,000 chariots drawn by four horses each, and 3,000 elephants. This is the first reference to the large-scale use of elephants in warfare. Such war elephants remained for a long time the most powerful strategic weapons of Indian rulers until the central Asian conquerors of the medieval period introduced the new method of the large-scale deployment of cavalry.

The Nandas could maintain their large army only by rigorously collecting the revenues of their empire and plundering their neighbours. Their name became a byword for avarice in later Indian literature. The legend of their great treasure which they are supposed to have hidden in the river Ganga reminds us of the old German story of the Nibelungen whose treasure was hidden in the river Rhine. Mahapadma Nanda was succeeded by his eight sons; each of them ruled only for a short time until the last one was overthrown by Chandragupta Maurya.

In spite of the very short period of their rule, the Nandas must be credited with having paved the way for their better-known successors, the Mauryas. They united a very large part of northern India under their rule

(see Map 2.1). Their army and their administration were taken over by the Mauryas as going concerns. But the empire of the Nandas lacked certain qualities which emerged only under the Mauryas. Just as certain new ideas coming from the West may have contributed to the rise of Magadha in the fifth century BC under Bimbisara, another wave of Western influence may have influenced the transformation of the empire of the Nandas into that of the Mauryas.

The impact of Alexander's Indian campaign

The Indian campaign of Alexander the Great is certainly one of the best-known events of ancient Indian history as far as European historiography is concerned. The historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have devoted much attention to this event. But Indian sources remain silent about Alexander's campaign. To the Indians he was only one of the nameless conquerors of the northwest who touched this part of India in an endless sequence of raids. The memory of Alexander the Great returned to India only much later with the Islamic conquerors who saw him as a great ruler worth emulating. One of the sultans of Delhi called himself a second Alexander, and the Islamic version of this name (Sikander) was very popular among later Islamic rulers of India and southeast Asia.

Alexander crossed the Hindukush mountains in eastern Afghanistan in the month of May, 327 BC. He fought for more than a year against various tribes in what is now northern Pakistan until he could cross the river Indus in February 326 BC. The king of Takshashila (Taxila) accepted Alexander's suzerainty without putting up a fight. He was a generous host to the Greeks and is reported to have fed them with the meat of 3,000 oxen and more than 10,000 sheep. Then he provided them with 5,000 auxiliary troops so that they could better fight his neighbour, King Poros. King Poros belonged to the tribe of the Pauravas, descended from the Puru tribe mentioned so often in the Rigveda. He joined battle with Alexander at the head of a mighty army with some 2,000 elephants, but Alexander defeated him by a sudden attack after crossing the river Hydaspes at night although the river was in flood. Alexander then reinstated the vanquished Poros and made him his ally.

By this time the monsoon had set in and the rains obstructed Alexander's march east. He was determined to go on, but when his army reached the river Hyphasis (Beas), east of the present city of Lahore, his soldiers refused to obey his orders for the first time in eight years of incessant conquest. Alexander was convinced that he would soon reach the end of the world, but his soldiers were less and less convinced of this as they proceeded to the east where more kings and war elephants were waiting to fight against them. Alexander's speech in which he invoked the memory of their victories over the Persians in order to persuade them to march on is one of the

most moving documents of Alexander's time, but so is the reply by Coenus, his general, who spoke on behalf of the soldiers. Alexander finally turned back and proceeded with his troops south along the river Indus where they got involved in battles with the tribes of that area, especially with the Malloi (Malavas). Alexander was almost killed in one of these encounters. He then turned west and crossed, with parts of his army, the desert land of Gedrosia which is a part of present Baluchistan. Very few survived this ordeal. In May 324 BC, three years after he had entered India, Alexander was back at Susa in Persia. In the following year he died in Babylon.

Alexander's early death and the division of his empire among the Diadochi who fought a struggle for succession put an end to the plan of integrating at least a part of India into the Hellenistic empire. By 317 BC the peripheral Greek outposts in India had been given up. Thus Alexander's campaign remained a mere episode in Indian history, but the indirect consequences of this intrusion were of great importance. The reports of Alexander's companions and of the first Greek ambassador at the court of the Mauryas were the main sources of Western knowledge about India from the ancient to the medieval period of history. Also, the Hellenistic states, which arose later on India's northwestern frontier in present Afghanistan, had an important influence on the development of Indian art as well as on the evolution of sciences such as astronomy.

The foundation of the Maurya empire

Alexander's campaign probably made an indirect impact on the further political development of India. Not much is known about the antecedents of Chandragupta Maurya, but it is said that he began his military career by fighting against the outposts which Alexander had left along the river Indus. How he managed to get from there to Magadha and how he seized power from the last Nanda emperor remains obscure. Indian sources, especially the famous play *Mudrarakshasa*, give the credit for Chandragupta's rise to his political advisor, the cunning Brahmin Kautalya, author of the *Arthashastra*.

At any rate Chandragupta seems to have usurped the throne of Magadha in 320 BC. He used the subsequent years for the consolidation of his hold on the army and administration of this empire. There are no reports of his leading any military campaigns in this period. But in 305 BC Seleukos Nikator, who had emerged as the ruler of the eastern part of Alexander's vast domain, crossed the Hindukush mountains in order to claim Alexander's heritage in India. Chandragupta met him at the head of a large army in the Panjab and stopped his march east. In the subsequent peace treaty Seleukos ceded to Chandragupta all territories to the east of Kabul as well as Baluchistan. The frontier of the Maurya empire was thus more or less the same as that of the Mughal empire at the height of its power

about 2,000 years later. Chandragupta's gift of 500 war elephants appears to be modest in view of this enormous territorial gain. But this Indian military aid is supposed to have helped Seleukos to defeat his western neighbour and rival, Antigonos, in a decisive battle some four years later.

European knowledge about India was greatly enhanced by the reports which Seleukos' ambassador, Megasthenes, prepared while he was in Pataliputra at Chandragupta's court. The originals have been lost but several classical authors have quoted long passages from Megasthenes' work and, therefore, we know a good deal about what he saw while he was there. Two parts of his report have attracted special attention: his description of the imperial capital, Pataliputra, and his account of the seven strata of Indian society which he observed there.

He reported that Pataliputra was fortified with palisades. This fortification was shaped like a parallelogram measuring about 9 miles in length and about 1.5 miles in breadth and it had 570 towers and 64 gates. The circumference of Pataliputra was about 21 miles and thus this city was about twice as large as Rome under Emperor Marcus Aurelius. If this report is true, Pataliputra must have been the largest city of the ancient world. There was an impression that Megasthenes may have exaggerated the size of the capital to which he was an ambassador in order to enhance his own importance. But the German Indologist D. Schlingloff has shown that the distances between the towers or between a tower and the next gate as derived from Megasthenes' account closely correspond to the distance prescribed for this kind of fortification in Kautalya's *Arthashastra* (i.e. 54 yards).

Megasthenes' description of the society of Magadha seems to be equally accurate. As the first estate, he mentioned the philosophers, by which he obviously means the Brahmins. The second estate was that of the agriculturists. According to Megasthenes, they were exempt from service in the army and from any other similar obligations to the state. No enemy would do harm to an agriculturist tilling his fields. For their fields they paid a rent to the king because 'in India all land belongs to the king and no private person is permitted to own land. In addition to this general rent they give one quarter of their produce to the state'. Megasthenes then named the herdsmen who lived outside the villages, then the traders and artisans 'who get their food from the royal storage'. The fifth estate were the soldiers who, like the war horses and war elephants, also got their food from the royal storage. The sixth estate was that of the inspectors and spies who reported everything to the emperor. The seventh estate was that of the advisors and officers of the king who looked after the administration, the law courts, etc., of the empire.

Although these seven social strata were not listed in any Indian text in this fashion (which does not seem to pay attention to any hierarchical order), there are references to each of them in Indian texts, too. The general impression we get from Megasthenes' report is that of a centrally

administered, well-organised state. Of special interest are his categorical assertions that all land belonged to the emperor, that artisans and soldiers were supported directly by the state and that spies reported on everything that went on in the empire. Perhaps these observations were applicable only to the capital and its immediate hinterland which was the area which Megasthenes knew well. But Kautalya's famous account of the proper organisation of an empire also talks about espionage.

The political system of the *Arthashastra*

The *Arthashastra* which is attributed to Kautalya, the Prime Minister and chief advisor of Chandragupta, provides an even more coherent picture of a centrally administered empire in which public life and the economy are controlled by the ruler. Ever since this ancient text was rediscovered and published in the year 1909 scholars have tried to interpret this text as an accurate description of Chandragupta's system of government. There is a consensus that Kautalya was the main author of this famous text and that he lived around 300 BC, but it is also accepted that parts of this text are later additions and revisions, some of which may have been made as late as AD 300.

Kautalya depicts a situation in which several small rival kingdoms each have a chance of gaining supremacy over the others if the respective ruler follows the instructions given by Kautalya. In ancient Indian history the period which corresponds most closely to Kautalya's description is that of the mahajanapadas before Magadha attained supremacy. Thus it seems more likely that Kautalya related in normative terms what he had come to know about this earlier period than that his account actually reflected the structure of the Mauryan empire during Chandragupta's reign. Thus the *Arthashastra* should not be regarded as a source for the study of the history of the empire only but also for the history of state formation in the immediately preceding period. The relevance of the *Arthashastra* for medieval Indian politics is that the coexistence of various smaller rival kingdoms was much more typical for most periods of Indian history than the rather exceptional phase when one great empire completely dominated the political scene.

The central idea of Kautalya's precept (*shastra*) was the prosperity (*artha*) of king and country. The king who strove for victory (*vijigishu*) was at the centre of a circle of states (*mandala*) in which the neighbour was the natural enemy (*ari*) and the more distant neighbour of this neighbour (enemy of the enemy) was the natural friend (*mitra*). This pattern of the *rajamandala* repeated itself in concentric circles of enemies and friends. But there were certain important exceptions: there was the middle king (*madhyama*) who was powerful enough that he could either maintain armed neutrality in a conflict of his neighbours or decide the battle by

supporting one side or the other, and finally there was the great outsider (*udashina*) whose actions were not predictable because he did not belong to one of these power circles but was able to interfere with it. He was to be carefully watched.

The *vijigishu* had to try to defeat one after another of his enemies. His ability to do so depended on the seven factors of power which supported his kingdom (*rajya*). These factors were, first of all, the qualities of the king, then that of his ministers, his provinces, his city, his treasure, his army and last, but not least, his allies. The main aim of the *Arthashastra* was to instruct the king on how to improve the qualities of these power factors and weaken those of his enemy even before an open confrontation took place. He was told to strengthen his fortifications, extend facilities for irrigation, encourage trade, cultivate wasteland, open mines, look after the forest and build enclosures for elephants and, of course, try to prevent the enemy from doing likewise. For this purpose he was to send spies and secret agents into his enemy's kingdom. The very detailed instructions for such spies and agents which Kautalya gives with great psychological insight into the weakness of human nature have earned him the doubtful reputation of having even surpassed Machiavelli's cunning advice in *Il Principe*. But actually Kautalya paid less attention to clandestine activities in the enemy's territory than to the elimination of 'thorns' in the king's own country.

Since Kautalya believed that political power was a direct function of economic prosperity, his treatise contained detailed information on the improvement of the economy by state intervention in all spheres of activity, including mining, trade, crafts and agriculture. He also outlined the structure of royal administration and set a salary scale starting with 48,000 panas for the royal high priest, down to 60 panas for a petty inspector. All this gives the impression of a very efficiently administered centralised state which appropriated as much of the surplus produced in the country as possible. There were no moral limits to this exploitation but there were limits of political feasibility. It was recognised that high taxes and forced labour would drive the population into the arms of the enemy and, therefore, the king had to consider the welfare and contentment of his people as a necessary political requirement for his own success.

The history of the Maurya empire after Chandragupta's defeat of Seleukos and the acquisition of the northwest remains a matter for conjecture. Since at the time of Ashoka's accession to the throne in 268 BC the empire extended as far as present Karnataka, we may conclude that either Chandragupta or his son and successor Bindusara (*c.*293 to 268 BC) had conquered these southern parts of India. Old Jaina texts report that Chandragupta was a follower of that religion and ended his life in Karnataka by fasting unto death, a great achievement of holy men in the Jaina tradition. If this report is true, Chandragupta must have started the conquest of the south. At Bindusara's court there were ambassadors of the Seleukids

and of the Ptolemaeans but they have not left us valuable reports as Megasthenes did a generation earlier.

Ashoka, the Beloved of the Gods

Ashoka's reign of more than three decades is the first fairly well-documented period of Indian history. Ashoka left us a series of great inscriptions (major rock edicts, minor rock edicts, pillar edicts) which are among the most important records of India's past. Ever since they were discovered and deciphered by the British scholar James Prinsep in the 1830s, several generations of Indologists and historians have studied these inscriptions with great care. The independent Republic of India selected Ashoka's lion pillar as the emblem of the state.

According to Buddhist tradition Prince Ashoka started his political career when he was appointed governor of Taxila in the northwest where he successfully suppressed a revolt. He was then transferred to Ujjain, the famous capital of the earlier kingdom of Avanti in central India. The precise date and the circumstances of Ashoka's accession to the throne are not yet

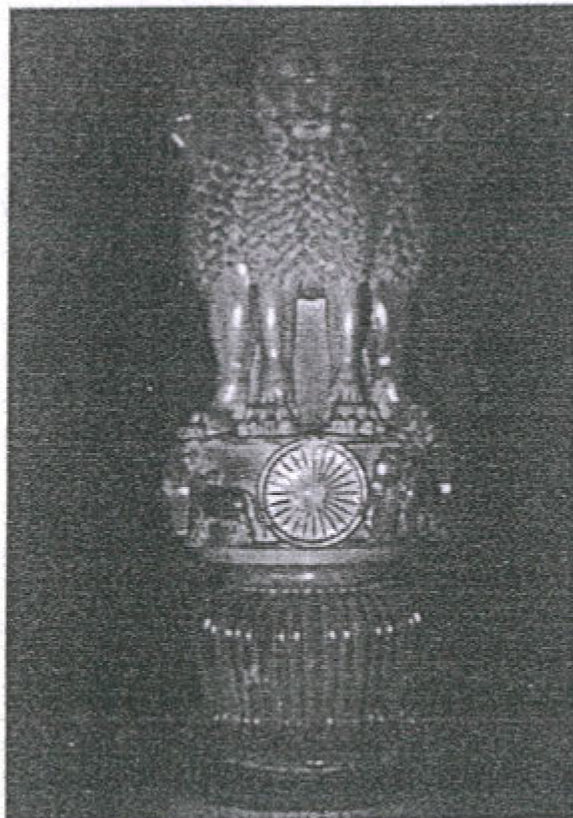


Figure 2.1 Sarnath, capital of an Ashoka-pillar, third century BC, now the coat of arms of the Republic of India

(Courtesy of Hermann Kulke)

known. Buddhist texts mention that Ashoka had to fight against his brothers and that he was crowned only four years after his de facto accession. But the Dutch Indologist Eggermont thinks that these are only legends which were invented later by the Buddhists, and he feels confident about dating Ashoka's reign from 268 to 233 BC.

The first important event of Ashoka's reign led to a crucial change in his life: in 261 BC he conquered Kalinga, a kingdom on the east coast which had resisted Maurya expansionism for a long time. In his inscriptions Ashoka told the cruel consequences of this war: '150,000 people were forcibly abducted from their homes, 100,000 were killed in battle and many more died later on.' Due to this experience Ashoka abjured further warfare and turned to Buddhism. In his famous thirteenth rock edict he stated: 'Even a hundredth or a thousandth part only of the people who were slain, killed or abducted in Kalinga is now considered as a grievous loss by Devanampiya [Beloved of the Gods, i.e. Ashoka]',[5] and he also stated that he now only strove for conquest in spiritual terms by spreading the doctrine of right conduct (*dhamma*).

He became a Buddhist lay member (*upasaka*) and two years after the Kalinga war he even went on a 256-day pilgrimage (*dhamma-yata*) to all Buddhist holy places in northern India. On his return to Pataliputra he celebrated a great festival of the Buddhist order and in the same year (258 BC, according to Eggermont) began his large-scale missionary activity. In numerous rock edicts strategically placed in all parts of his empire he propagated the principles of right conduct and, to all countries known to him, he sent ambassadors to spread the message of right conduct abroad. He instructed governors and district officers to have the principles of right conduct inscribed on rocks and pillars wherever possible, thereby producing a series of smaller rock edicts in which Ashoka openly confessed his Buddhist faith.

In the following year, 257 BC, he had the first four of altogether fourteen large rock edicts cut into rocks in the frontier regions of his empire. Eight more or less complete versions of these have been discovered so far. More recently two fragmentary versions came to light. One of them, a Greek–Aramaic bilingual, was found even in far-off Kandahar in Afghanistan. In these edicts Ashoka ordered all citizens of his empire to desist as far as possible from eating meat and he also prohibited illicit and immoral meetings. He indicated his goodwill to all neighbours beyond the borders of his empire: to the Cholas, Pandyas, Satyaputras, Keralaputras and to Tambapani (Sri Lanka) in the south and to King Antiyoka of Syria (Antiochos II, 261 to 246 BC) and his neighbours in the west. Further, he ordered different ranks of officers to tour the area of their jurisdiction regularly to see that the rules of right conduct were followed.

Ashoka's orders seem to have been resisted right from the beginning. He indirectly admitted this when, in the new series of rock edicts in the

thirteenth year after his coronation he stated: 'Virtuous deeds are difficult to accomplish. He who tries to accomplish them faces a hard task.' In order to break the resistance and to intensify the teaching of right conduct he appointed high officers called *Dhamma-Mahamatras* that year. They had to teach right conduct and supervise the people in this. They also had to report to the emperor, and he emphasised that these officers were to have access to him at all times even if he was having his meals or resting in his private rooms. These officers were 'deployed everywhere, in Pataliputra as well as in all distant cities, in the private rooms of my brothers and sisters and all of my relatives'.

In the same year in which he appointed these special officers he also sent ambassadors (*duta*) to the distant countries of the West. As a unique event in Indian history the kings of these distant countries are mentioned by name in the thirteenth rock edict: the king of the Greeks (Yona), Antiyoka (as mentioned above), Tulamaya (Ptolomaios II, Philadelphos, 285–247 BC), Antekina (Antigonos Gonatas of Macedonia, 276–239 BC), Maka (Magas of Cyrene, *c*.300–250 BC), Alikasudala (probably Alexander of Epirus, 272–255 BC). The independent states of southern India and Sri Lanka were once again visited by ambassadors and also some of the tribes in areas within the empire (e.g. the Andhras). The frequency of inscriptions in the border regions of the northwestern and southern provinces is an eloquent evidence of Ashoka's missionary zeal.

This activity of imperial missions was unique in ancient history. Of greater consequence than the establishment of direct contact with the Hellenistic world was, however, the success of missions in the south and in Sri Lanka. There Ashoka's son Mahinda personally appeared in order to teach right conduct. The northwest was also deeply affected by this missionary zeal. From southern India, Buddhism later travelled to south-east Asia and from northwest India it penetrated central Asia from where it reached China via the silk road in the first century AD.

Ashoka did not neglect his duties as a ruler while pursuing his missionary activities. In spite of his contrition after the conquest of Kalinga, he never thought of relinquishing his hold over this country or of sending back the people abducted from there. As an astute politician, he also did not express his contrition in the rock edicts which he put up in Kalinga itself (Dhauli and Jaugada). Instead of the text of the famous thirteenth rock edict we find in the so-called 'separate edicts' in Kalinga the following words:

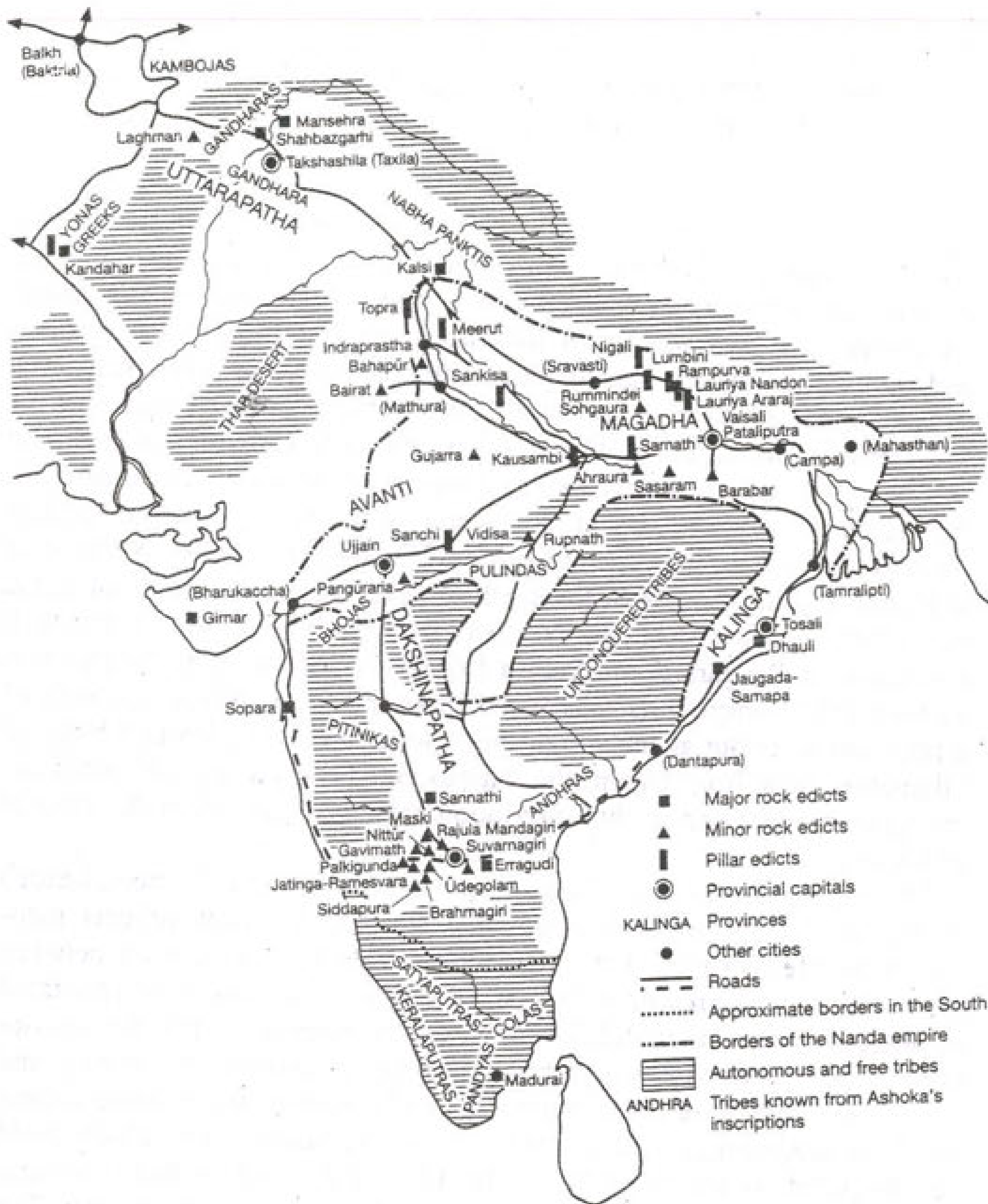
> All men are my children. As on behalf of my own children, I desire that they may be provided by me with complete welfare and happiness in this world and in the other world, even so is my desire on behalf of all men. It may occur to my unconquered borderers to ask: 'What does the king desire with reference to us?' This alone is my wish with reference to the borderers, that they may learn that

> the king desires this, that they may not be afraid of me, but may have confidence in me; that they may obtain only happiness from me, not misery, that they may learn this, that the king will forgive them what can be forgiven. (Ashoka orders his officers:) For you are able to inspire those borderers with confidence and to secure their welfare and happiness in this world and the other world.

Ashoka's inscriptions also provide a great deal of important information about the organisation of the empire which was divided into five parts. The central part consisted of Magadha and some of the adjacent old mahajanapadas. This part was under the direct administration of the emperor and, though not much is said about its administration, we may assume that it was conducted more or less in line with what had been mentioned by Megasthenes and Kautalya. Then there were four large provinces governed by princes (*kumara* or *aryaputra*) as governors or viceroys. The viceroy of the northwest resided at Taxila, the viceroy of the east at Tosali in Kalinga (near Bhubaneswar, the present capital of Orissa), the viceroy of the west at Ujjain, and the viceroy of the south at Suvarnagiri (near Kurnool in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh). As a newly discovered minor rock inscription at Panguraria in Madhya Pradesh is addressed by Ashoka to a kumara, this inscription is interpreted as an indication of the existence of a fifth province. But as the site of this inscription is only about a hundred kilometres away from Ujjain, the famous capital of the western province, the kumara addressed in this inscription may well have been the viceroy of Ujjain.

The large provinces were divided into fairly extensive districts, headed by *mahamatras*. The mahamatras were probably the high officers mentioned by Megasthenes. They were responsible for the relation between the centre and the provinces. In provincial towns they also were appointed as judges (*nagara-viyohalaka*). In addition to the mahamatras the inscriptions mention the following ranks of officers: *pradeshika*, *rajuka* and *yukta*. The latter were petty officers, probably scribes and revenue collectors. The pradeshikas were in charge of administrative units which could be compared to the divisions of British India which included several districts. Whether the rajuka was a district officer is not quite clear. The fourth pillar inscription belonging to the twenty-sixth year of Ashoka's reign mentions that the rajuka is 'appointed over many hundred thousands of people' and was given special powers of penal jurisdiction, but the same inscription also states that the rajukas had to obey orders conveyed by royal emissaries (*pulisani*) who, as Ashoka emphasised, knew exactly what he wanted done.

References of this kind have often been used to show that Ashoka was running a highly centralised direct administration of his whole empire. But the pillar inscriptions which contain these latter references have so



Map 2.1 Maurya empire under Ashoka (262–233 BC)

far been found only in central Gangetic region and the Ganga–Yamuna Doab. Similar inscriptions may still be found at other places, but the pillar inscriptions discovered so far seem to indicate that this specific type of administration prevailed only in the central part of the empire, and that the provinces had a greater degree of administrative autonomy. However, recently conquered Kalinga may have been an exception. In its rock edict,

the district administration of Samapa (Jaugada) was addressed directly without reference to the district's viceroy (*kumara*) at Tosali.

In modern historical maps Ashoka's empire is often shown as covering the whole subcontinent, with the exception of its southern tip. But if we look at the sites where Ashoka's inscriptions have been found, we clearly see a definite regional pattern (see Map 2.1). These sites demarcate the five parts of the empire. It is striking that the major rock edicts have so far been found only in the frontier provinces of the empire and not at its centre. Three were found in the northwest (Shahbazgarhi, Mansehra and Kandahar), two in the west (Girnar and Sopara), two in the south (Erragudi and Sannathi), two in the east (Dhauli and Jaugada), and one at the border between the central region and the northwestern province at Kalsi. It is also important to note that ten small rock edicts form a cluster in the southern province and that a good number of pillar inscriptions are concentrated in the central part of the empire and in the upper Ganga–Yamuna Doab. Moreover, the region around the provincial capital of Ujjain once must have formed another cluster, although only fragments of a pillar at Sanchi with Ashoka's famous 'schism edict' and the newly discovered minor rock edict of Panguraria have survived. This high incidence of inscriptions in certain main parts of the empire and on the frontiers contrasts with the vast 'empty' space of the interior of the subcontinent where no inscriptions have been found which can be attributed to Ashoka.

Of course, it is not impossible that some may be still discovered but after more than a century of intensive research in this field it seems highly unlikely that the regional pattern mentioned above would have to be completely revised. This means that large parts of present Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh as well as Kerala and Tamil Nadu were not actually included in the Maurya empire.

South of the Vindhya mountains the Mauryas mainly controlled the coastal areas and some of the interior near present Mysore which they probably coveted because of the gold which was found there (Suvarnagiri means 'gold mountain'). For the empire it was essential to control the major trade routes. Most important was certainly the northern route which led from Pataliputra through the Gangetic plain and the Panjab to Afghanistan. Another led from Pataliputra west via Kausambi and then along the northern slope of the Vindhya mountains via Vidisha (Sanchi) and Ujjain to the port of Bharukacha (Broach). There was a further route from there along the west coast to the area of present Bombay where the great rock edicts of Sopara were found. Southern parts could be reached along the east coast or via a central route from Ujjain via Pratishthana (Paithan near Aurangabad) to Suvarnagiri. The northern portion of this route – at least up to Ujjain – had been known since the late Vedic period as Dakshinapatha (southern route). Large areas of the interior were inhabited by tribes which had not been defeated. The inscriptions explicitly mention such undefeated

(*avijita*) neighbours and forest tribes (*atavi*) inside the empire, and one gets the impression that Ashoka regarded these tribes as the most dangerous enemies of his empire.

This revision of the spatial extension of the Maurya empire nevertheless does not detract from its 'All-India' dimensions and that it marked the apex of the process of state formation which had started in the sixth century BC. The hub of the empire remained the old region of the major mahajanapadas in the triangle Delhi–Pataliputra–Ujjain. Campaigns of conquest had added the northwest, Kalinga, and an enclave in the south to the empire. Control of major trade routes and of the coasts was of major importance for the access to mercantile wealth which must have been essential for imperial finance.

Ashoka's greatness was due to his insight into the futility of further expansionist warfare which would not have added much to the empire but would have impeded its consolidation. In order to conquer the vast areas in the interior, Ashoka would have had to fight many more bloody wars. About 2,000 years later the Mughal empire broke under the strain of incessant conquest when Aurangzeb tried to achieve what Ashoka had wisely avoided. In consolidating his empire, Ashoka adopted revolutionary methods. As emphasised by the Indian historian Romila Thapar, he must have realised that such a vast empire could not be based simply on the naked power polities of the *Arthashastra* but that it required some deeper legitimation. Therefore he adopted the doctrine of right conduct as the maxim of his policy. For the spread of this doctrine, he relied on the spiritual infrastructure provided by the new Buddhist community which was in ascendance in those days. But he carefully avoided equating his doctrine of right conduct with Buddhism as such. He also included the Brahmins and the sect of the Ajivikas in his religious policy.

After a period of unscrupulous power politics under the earlier rulers of Magadha, Indian kingship attained a moral dimension in Ashoka's reign. But in the means he adopted, he was influenced by the tradition of statecraft epitomised by Kautalya. The Dhamma-Mahamatras which he put into the entourage of his relatives – from whom challenges to his power would be expected to come – were different in name only from Kautalya's spies. This, of course, should not detract from the greatness of his vision which prompted him to strive for an ethical legitimation of his imperial rule. His success was nevertheless not only due to his ideology and the strength of his army and administration but also to the relative backwardness of central and southern India in his day. When regional centres of power emerged in those parts of the country in the course of an autochthonous process of state formation in later centuries, the course of Indian history was changed once more and the great regional kingdoms of the early medieval period arose. In that period the old tradition of the legitimation of Hindu kings was revived and Ashoka's great vision was eclipsed.

THE END OF THE MAURYA EMPIRE AND THE NORTHERN INVADERS

The history of the Maurya empire after the death of Ashoka is not very well recorded. There are only stray references in Buddhist texts, the Indian Puranas and some Western classical texts and these references often contradict each other. None of Ashoka's successors produced any larger rock edicts. Perhaps the paternal tone of these edicts and the instruction to recite them publicly on certain days of the year had caused resentment among the people. Buddhist texts maintain that there was evidence of the decay of the empire even in the last days of Ashoka but this view is not generally accepted. The more distant provinces probably attained independence from the empire after Ashoka's death. There is, for instance, no evidence in the south or in Kalinga for the continuation of Maurya domination after Ashoka. Perhaps even the central part of the empire in the north may have been divided among Ashoka's sons and grandsons. One descendant, Dasaratha, succeeded Ashoka on the throne of Magadha, and he is the only one whom we know by name because he left some otherwise unimportant stone inscriptions with which he established some endowment for the Ajivika sect at a place south of Pataliputra.

Figure 2.2 Buddha, Gandhara style at Takht-i-Bahai (near Peshawar), second to third century BC

(Courtesy of Museum of Indian Art, Berlin)

The last ruler of the Maurya dynasty, Brihadratha, was assassinated by his general, Pushyamitra Shunga, during a parade of his troops in the year 185 BC. The usurper then founded the Shunga dynasty which continued for 112 years but about which very little is known. No inscriptions of this dynasty have ever been discovered. Pushyamitra is reported to have been a Brahmin and it is said that his rise to power marked a Brahmin reaction to Buddhism which had been favoured for such a long time by previous rulers. Pushyamitra once again celebrated the Vedic horse sacrifice. This was certainly a clear break with Ashoka's tradition which had prohibited animal sacrifices altogether.

There is some other evidence, too, for the inclination of Indian kings to violate the rules established by the Mauryas and to revive old customs which had been forbidden by them. King Kharavela stated in an inscription of the first century BC near Bhubaneswar that he had reintroduced the musical festivals and dances which were prohibited under the Mauryas. There were reactions against the religious policy of the Mauryas, indeed, but this does not necessarily imply that Buddhism was suppressed and that the Shungas started a Brahmin counter-reformation as some Buddhist texts suggest. Several Buddhist monasteries, for instance the one at Sanchi, were renovated and enlarged under the Shunga rule. At Bharhut, south of Kausambi, they even sponsored the construction of a new Buddhist stupa. The Shunga style differed from the Maurya style, which was greatly influenced by Persian precedent. Old elements of folk art and of the cult of the mother goddess reappeared in the Shunga style which was 'more Indian' and is sometimes regarded as the first indigenous style of Indian art.

Immediately after taking the throne, Pushyamitra had to defend his country against the Greek invaders from Bactria who came to conquer the Indian plains. Pushyamitra prevented their complete success but nevertheless the whole area up to Mathura was finally lost. His son, Agnimitra, is supposed to have been posted as viceroy at Vidisha near Sanchi before ascending the throne. This was reported by the great poet Kalidasa, several centuries later. Towards the end of the second century BC the Greek ambassador, Heliodorus, who represented King Antialkidas, erected a tall Garuda pillar at Besnagar, very close to Vidisha. In his inscription on this pillar, Heliodorus calls himself a follower of the Bhagavata sect of the Vaishnavas and mentions a king by the name of Bhagabhadra who seems to have been a member of the Shunga dynasty. So Vidisha was probably still under the control of the Shungas, but they had obviously lost Ujjain, the old provincial capital situated about a hundred miles further to the west. The last king of the Shunga dynasty was murdered around 73 BC by a slave girl and, it is said, instigated by the king's Brahmin minister, Vasudeva.

The short-lived Kanva dynasty, which was founded by Vasudeva after the Shunga dynasty, witnessed the complete decline of Magadha which relapsed to its earlier position of one mahajanapada among several others.

The political centre of India had shifted to the northwest where several foreign dynasties struggled for supremacy. In 28 BC the last Kanva king was defeated by a king of the Shatavahana (or Andhra) dynasty of central India. This fact not only signalled the end of the Magadha after five centuries of imperial eminence but also the rise of central and southern India which continued throughout the subsequent centuries.

Greek rulers of the northwest

When the Maurya empire was at the height of its power it could thwart all attempts of the Seleukids to claim Alexander's heritage in India. Chandragupta had repulsed Seleukos Nikator at the end of the fourth century BC and a later king of the same dynasty, Antiochos III, who tried to conquer the Indian plains about one century later was equally frustrated. But this was due less to the efficacy of Indian resistance than to the great upheavals which had occurred in Bactria, Persia and southern central Asia in the meantime.

Around 250 BC the Parthians, under King Arsakes, had won their independence from the Seleukids. After a century of tough fights against their former masters and against central Asian nomadic horsemen, they had established hegemony over western Asia. Until their final defeat about AD 226 they remained the most dangerous enemies of the Romans. At about the same time that Arsakes won independence from the Seleukids, the viceroy of Bactria, Diodotos, did the same and established a kingdom of his own. But only the third Greek king of Bactria, Euthydemos, was able to get formal recognition from the Seleukid king, Antiochos III, when he was on his Indian campaign which has been referred to above.

The history of the Greek kings of Bactria became a part of Indian history when the successors of Euthydemos once again tried to follow Alexander's example. They are referred to as 'Indo-Greeks' and there were about forty such kings and rulers who controlled large areas of northwestern India and Afghanistan. Their history, especially during the first century BC, is not very well recorded. Of some of these kings we know the names only, from coins. There are only two inscriptions in India to give us some information about these Indo-Greeks. They appear as *Yavanas* in stray references in Indian literature, and there are few but important references in European sources. In these distant outposts, the representatives of the Hellenic policy survived the defeat of their Western compatriots at the hands of the Parthians for more than a century.

In India the history of the Indo-Greeks is particularly associated with the name of their most prominent king, Menander, who conquered a large part of northern India. This Indian campaign was started by King Demetrios and his brother Apollodoros with the help of their general, Menander, who subsequently became a king in his own right. There is a debate among

historians about whether these three military leaders conquered almost the whole of northern India jointly within a few years after 180 BC, or whether this was achieved in two stages, the second stage following the first by about three decades and exclusively managed by Menander. Menander also annexed most of the Ganga–Yamuna Doab and perhaps even reached Pataliputra. Some 150 years later Strabo reported in his *Geography*:

> The Greeks who occasioned its revolt (Bactria's) became so powerful by means of its fertility and the advantages of the country that they became the masters of Ariana and India. Their chiefs, particularly Menander if he really crossed the Hypasis to the East and reached Isamus [i.e. Yamuna] conquered more nations than Alexander. The conquests were achieved partly by Menander, partly by Demetrius, son of Euthydemus, king of the Bactrians.[1]

According to the findings of the British historian W.W. Tarn, Demetrios crossed the Hindukush mountains about 183 BC only shortly after Pushyamitra Shunga had seized power at Pataliputra. Demetrios conquered Gandhara and Taxila and established his new capital at Sirkap near Taxila. He continued his campaign down the river Indus and captured the old port, Patala, which he renamed Demetrias. His brother Apollodoros then marched further east in order to capture the ports of Gujarat, especially Bharukacha which was later known as Barygaza to the Romans who had a great deal of trade with this port.

The unknown seafarer who left us the famous account, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* in the first century AD reported that he had seen coins of Apollodoros and Menander at Barygaza. It is presumed that this port was in the hands of the Greeks for some time. Apollodoros proceeded east and conquered the area around Gwalior and probably also the old provincial capital, Ujjain. In a parallel move Menander, who was then still a general of King Demetrios, marched down into the Gangetic basin and reached Pataliputra. Whether he really conquered this capital and held it for some time, as Tarn assumes, or not, we know that Pushyamitra Shunga was finally able to defeat the Greeks.

But even more than Pushyamitra's resistance it was a revolt in Bactria which forced the Greeks to withdraw. Eukratides, a Greek adventurer with the mind of a genius, managed to seize power in Bactria. Thereupon Demetrios appointed Apollodoros and Menander as viceroys of the Indus region and of the Panjab and rushed back to Bactria where he was killed in the civil war. Eukratides then also defeated Apollodoros, but Menander was able to hold on to his territory further east. In subsequent decades the kingdom of Eukratides and his successors came under increasing pressure from the Parthians. Weakened by this constant warfare, this Greek kingdom finally succumbed to the Shakas, a central Asian tribe, between 141 and

128 BC. But in northwest India the period of Indo-Greek rule continued for some time and this was, in fact, a period of great splendour.

The greatest of the Indo-Greek rulers was undoubtedly Menander, who is called Milinda in Buddhist texts. The dates of his reign are still open to debate. Tarn suggests 166 to 150 BC, the Indian historian A.K. Narain prefers 155 to 130 BC. He was the only Indo-Greek ruler commemorated in Indian literature. The famous text *Milindapanho* records a dialogue between Menander and a monk, Nagasena, who introduced him to the Buddhist doctrine. This dialogue is justly praised for the incisive questions asked by Menander and it is regarded by the Buddhists as equal in value to their canonical scriptures. It is not certain whether Menander was actually converted to Buddhism, but he seems to have taken a deep interest in it. Some of his coins show a wheel similar to the Buddhist chakra. Plutarch reports that after Menander's death his ashes were distributed to all cities of his kingdom where monuments were then constructed to contain them – a kind of commemoration which was in tune with Buddhist practice.

After Menander's death, his large kingdom broke up into several small ones which survived for several generations. This survival, far removed from the Hellenistic polity, is a remarkable historical event. The pillar of Heliodoros, mentioned above, is an impressive testimony of this Greek presence right in the heart of India. The political influence of the Indo-Greek states on the further course of Indian history was negligible, but they did make an impact on the subsequent foreign invaders who came to India in quick succession. The most important legacy of the Indo-Greeks was Gandhara art which embodied a synthesis of Greek, Roman and Indian features that are reflected in the image of Buddha which then radiated from India to all other parts of Asia.

Another Indo-Greek contribution, of great importance for historians, is their highly developed coinage. Whereas the Maurya emperors had only produced simple punch-marked coins, even petty Indo-Greek kings issued splendid coins with their image. No period of Indian history is richer in impressive coins than this fairly short period of the Indo-Greeks. This style of coinage was followed by later dynasties and set the pattern for all coins of ancient India. Only some slight changes were made when the Kushanas adopted Roman standards for the weight of their coins and the Guptas then introduced an Indian standard. For the historians this new source proves to be often more reliable, at least for the identification and dating of rulers, than inscriptions and literary texts. For the Indo-Greek kings this coinage was not just an instrument of propagating their own importance, but a practical means of fostering regional and inter-regional trade which was so important for the maintenance of their rule. This combination of domination and commerce was copied from the Indo-Greek precedent by the Shakas and Kushanas who became their heirs in northern India.

The Shakas: new invaders from central Asia

In the last centuries of the first millennium BC northwestern India was once more subjected to a new wave of immigration from central Asia. In Bactria several tribes clashed in the second century BC and pushed each other towards the fertile lowlands in the south. This migration began around 170 BC in the eastern region of central Asia when the nomadic Xiongnu (Hiung-nu) (probably the ancestors of the latter-day Huns) defeated the Yuezhi (Yue-chi) who then moved west where they hit upon a third nomadic tribe, the Sai Wang or Shakas, who in turn moved to the west. According to Chinese reports some of these Shakas directly crossed the mountains and entered the Indus plains whereas others invaded Bactria and eastern Iran. Together with their kinsmen, the Scythians, they became a major threat to the Parthian empire and two Parthian rulers lost their lives in fighting against them. But in the reign of Mithridates II (123 to 88 BC), the Shakas seem to have recognised Parthian suzerainty and some of them settled down in Sakastan (Sistan) in what is now southern Afghanistan. There they intermarried with Scythians and with the local Parthian nobility. Other clans of the Shakas appeared as conquerors in India where they dominated the political scene of the northwest for nearly a century.

The first Shaka king in India was Maues. There are various estimates of the dates of his reign, ranging from 94 BC to AD 22. Under him and his successor, Azes I, the Shakas established a large Indian empire including the northwest and parts of central India from Gandhara down to Mathura and Ujjain and all the way to the coast of Saurashtra. The Shakas wiped out the Indo-Greek kingdoms but largely adopted their culture with which they had already become familiar in Bactria. The Shaka kings translated their Iranian title 'King of Kings' into Greek (*basileus basileon*), used the Greek names of the months and issued coins in the Indo-Greek style.

A Jaina text of a later period, the *Kalakacharyakathanaka*, reports that Kalaka went from Ujjain to the country of the Shakas. Kings were called Shahi there and the mightiest king was called Shahanu Shahi. Kalaka stayed with one of those Shahis and when this one, together with ninety-five others, incurred the displeasure of the Shahanu Shahi, he persuaded them to go to India. They first came to Saurashtra, but in the autumn they moved on to Ujjain and conquered that city. The Shahi became the superior king of that region and thus emerged the dynasty of the Shaka kings. But some time later the king of Malwa, Vikramaditya, revolted and defeated the Shakas and became the superior king. He started a new era. After 135 years, another Shaka king vanquished the dynasty of Vikramaditya and started another new era.[2]

Despite this story of the origins of the two Indian eras, the Vikrama era, which started in 58 BC and the more important Shaka era beginning in AD 78 (adopted officially by the government of independent India), historians are still debating the issue. They generally agree that there was no king by

the name Vikramaditya of Malwa. The Vikrama era is now believed to be connected with the Shaka king, Azes I. The beginning of the Shaka era is supposed to coincide with the accession to the throne of the great Kushana emperor, Kanishka, the dates of whose reign are still debated.

In other respects the Jaina text seems to reflect the situation in the Shaka period of dominance fairly accurately. The Shaka political system was obviously one of a confederation of chieftains who all had the Persian title Shahi. The text mentions that there were ninety-five of them. The Indian and Persian titles were 'Great King' (*maharaja*) and 'King of Kings' (*shahanu shahi*, or, in Sanskrit *rajatiraja*) which the Shakas assumed may have reflected their real position rather than an exaggerated image of their own importance. They were *primus inter pares* as leaders of tribal confederations whose chieftains had the title Shahi. The grandiloquent title 'King of Kings' which the Shakas introduced into India, following Persian and Greek precedents, thus implied not a notion of omnipotence but rather the existence of a large number of fairly autonomous small kings. But the Shaka kings also appointed provincial governors called Kshatrapas and Mahakshatrapas (like the Persian *satraps*), though it is not quite clear how they fitted into the pattern of a tribal confederation. Perhaps some of them – particularly the Mahakshatrapas – may have been members of the royal lineage, but there may also have been local Indian rulers among them whom one accommodated in this way. Such a network of Kshatrapas may have served as a counterweight to too powerful tribal chieftains.

In the last decades BC the Shaka empire showed definite signs of decay while the provincial governors became more powerful. Azes II was the last great Shaka king of the northwest. About AD 20 the Shakas were replaced by the short-lived Indo-Parthian dynasty founded by King Gondopharnes who reigned until AD 46. He seems to have been a provincial governor of Arachosia in southern Afghanistan. Though he managed to conquer the central part of the Shaka domain, the eastern part around Mathura seems to have remained outside his kingdom because the local Shaka Kshatrapas in this region had attained their independence. The same was true of Saurashtra where independent Shaka Kshatrapas still held sway until the time of the Gupta empire.

Gondopharnes appeared in third century AD Christian texts as Gunduphar, King of India, at whose court St Thomas is supposed to have lived, converting many people to Christianity. According to Christian sources of the third century AD which refer to St Thomas ('Acts of St Thomas'), the saint moved later on to Kerala and finally died the death of a martyr near Madras. These southern activities of St Thomas are less well documented, but there can be no doubt about early Christian contacts with Gondopharnes. In a further mutation of his name (via Armenian 'Gathaspar') Gondopharnes became 'Kaspar', one of the three *magi* or kings of the east who play such an important role in Christian tradition.

The Kushana empire: a short-lived Asian synthesis

While in the early first century AD Indo-Parthians, Shakas and the remnants of the Indo-Greeks were still fighting each other in India, new invaders were already on their way. The Yuezhi under the leadership of the Kushanas came down from central Asia and swept away all earlier dynasties of the northwest in a great campaign of conquest. They established an empire which extended from central Asia right down to the eastern Gangetic basin. Their earlier encounter with the Shakas whom they displaced in central Asia has been mentioned above. The Xiongnu, their old enemies, did not leave the Yuezhi in possession of the land they had taken from the Shakas but pushed them further west. Thus they appeared in Bactria only a few decades after the Shakas and took over this territory in the late second century BC. Here in Bactria they seem to have changed their previous nomadic life style and settled down in five large tribal territories with a chieftain (*yabgu*) at the head of each.

Around the time of the birth of Christ, Kujala Kadphises, Yabgu of the Kuei-shang (Kushana) vanquished the four other yabgus and established the first Kushana kingdom. The history of the further development of this kingdom is recorded in the chronicles of the contemporary Han dynasty of China which were compiled in the fifth century AD. These chronicles report that Kadphises, after uniting the five principalities, proclaimed himself king, attacked the Parthians, crossed the Hindukush and conquered Gandhara and Ki-pin (Kashmir). When he died at the age of 80 years, his son Vima Kadphises, so the chronicles state, proceeded to conquer India where he appointed a viceroy. Numismatic research has confirmed these statements in recent times. Several coins of Kadphises I were found, which show on one side the name of the last Greek ruler of the valley of Kabul, Hermaios and, on the reverse, his own name, Kujala Kada, Prince of the Kushanas. Since the later coins of Kadphises I no longer refer to him as Yabgu but as king (*maharaja*), historians assume that Kadphises had earlier

Figure 2.3 Kushana gold coin. Obverse: Kanishka in central Asian dress. Reverse: Buddha ('Buddo'), Greek script *c.*100 AD

(Courtesy of The British Museum)

recognised the suzerainty of Hermaios until the Parthians or Kadphises himself had defeated this monarch.

Kadphises I was followed by a 'nameless' king who was known only from his coins which referred to him as *soter mages* (great saviour). In 1993 a most important stone inscription of Kanishka was discovered in Rabatak in northern Afghanistan, which contains an unambiguous genealogy of the early Kushana rulers. Kadphises was followed by Vima Takto, Vima Kadphises II and Kanishka. Accordingly, Vima Takto is the king who had so far been nameless. The monumental sculpture at Mat/Mathura which bears the incomplete inscription 'Vima Tak' thus represents Vima Takto. Vima Takto and Kadphises II continued the aggressive policy initiated by Kadphises I and conquered northern India down to Mathura or even Varanasi. Kadphises II changed the standard of the coins which had so far been of the same weight as the Indo-Greek ones by following Roman precedent. The gold of these coins seems to have been procured by melting down Roman coins (*aurei*), which were pouring into India in increasing quantities ever since the Greek seafarer Hippalos had explored the swift monsoon passage across the Arabian sea in the first century BC. The Kushana coins are of such high quality that some historians believe that they must have been made by Roman mint masters in the service of the Kushana kings.

Whereas Kadphises I seems to have been close to Buddhism – he calls himself on his coins 'firm in right conduct' (*dharma thita*) – Kadphises II seems to have been a devotee of the Hindu god Shiva. There were some other Kushana rulers during this age. Inscriptions and coins refer to those kings but do not record their names. Thus, an inscription was found at Taxila of a king with the grandiloquent title 'Great King, King of Kings, Son of God, the Kushana' (*maharaja rajatiraja devaputra Kushana*). Other coins announce in Greek language a 'King of Kings, the Great Savior' (*basileus basileon soter mages*). It is assumed that some of these inscriptions and coins were produced on behalf of the 'nameless' king, i.e. Vima Takto, or by the viceroys whom Kadphises I had appointed in India and who have been mentioned in Chinese chronicles. The titles adopted by the Kushanas show that they valiantly tried to legitimise their rule over all kinds of petty kings and princes. 'Great King' (*maharaja*) was an old Indian title, 'King of Kings' (*rajatiraja*) was of Persian origin and had already been adopted by the Shakas, but the title 'Son of God' (*devaputra*) was a new one. Perhaps it reflected the Kushanas' understanding of the Chinese 'mandate of heaven'. The Greek titles *basileus* and *soter* were frequently used by the Indo-Greek kings of northwestern India.

Vima Kadphises II was succeeded by Kanishka, the greatest of all Kushana rulers. The first references to Kanishka were found in the eastern parts of the Kushana empire in the Ganga–Yamuna Doab, which was probably under the control of rather autonomous viceroys. In two inscriptions

of the second and third year of his reign which have been found at Kausambi and Sarnath in the east, he merely calls himself Maharaja Kanishka. Yet in an inscription of the seventh year of his reign at Mathura he gives his title as Maharaja Rajatiraja Devaputra Shahi, a designation which is repeated in an inscription of the eleventh year of his reign in the central Indus valley. All this would indicate that Kanishka first came to power in the east and, after he had seized the centre of the empire which was probably at Mathura, he adopted the full titles of his predecessors.

The vast extension of Kanishka's empire cannot be adequately outlined. It probably reached from the Oxus in the west to Pataliputra in the east and from Kashmir in the north via Malwa right down to the coast of Gujarat in the south. Not much is known about his hold on central Asia, but there is a reference to the defeat of a Kushana army by the Chinese general, Pan-Chao, at Khotan in the year AD 90 where coins of all early Kushana kings have been found. The kings wanted to control the trade routes connecting India with Rome, i.e. those land and sea routes which would enable this trade to bypass the Parthians' routes. This trade must have been very profitable to the Kushanas. Pliny (VI, 10) laments in those days: 'There is no year in which India does not attract at least 50 million sesterces [Roman coins].' Yet though fifty-seven out of the sixty-eight finds of Roman coins in the whole of southern Asia were found in south India, none at all were found in the area of the Kushana empire. This must be due to the fact that the Kushanas as a matter of policy melted down and reissued them. After the debasement of Roman silver coins in AD 63 in the reign of Nero, gold became the most important medium of exchange for the Roman trade with India, and this must have greatly contributed to the rise of the Kushanas to prosperity and power.

Kanishka's fame is not only based on his military and political success but also on his spiritual merit. The Buddhists rank him together with Ashoka, Menander and Harsha as one of the great Buddhist rulers of India. The great stupa near Peshawar is rated as his greatest contribution to Buddhist monumental architecture. Several Chinese pilgrims have left us descriptions of this stupa and have stated that it was about 600 feet high. When archaeologists excavated the foundations of this stupa at the beginning of the twentieth century they found that it was 286 feet in diameter. Therefore it must have been one of the great miracles of the ancient world. Kanishka is also supposed to have convened a Buddhist council in Kashmir which stimulated the growth of Mahayana Buddhism. For the development of Indian art it was of great importance that Kanishka not only favoured the Gandhara school of Buddhist art which had grown out of Greek influences but also provided his patronage to the Mathura school of art which set the style of Indian art. This school produced the famous statue of Kanishka of which, unfortunately, only the headless trunk has survived. His dress here shows the typical central Asian style.

Kanishka's religious policy is reflected in the legends and images of his coins. His far-flung empire contained so many cultures and religious traditions that only a religious syncretism could do justice to this rich heritage. Accordingly Kanishka's coins show Hindu, Buddhist, Greek, Persian and even Sumerian–Elamite images of gods. Personally Kanishka seems to have shown an inclination towards Buddhism but also towards the Persian cult of Mithras. An inscription at Surkh-Kotal in Bactria which was discovered in 1958 maintains that after Kanishka's death in the thirty-first year of the era which he had started with his accession to the throne, he himself became identified with Mithras. This was probably an attempt by the adherents of Mithras to claim the religious heritage of the great emperor for their cult. Kanishka's syncretism reminds us of that of Ashoka in an earlier and of Akbar in a later age. Great emperors of India who had a vision beyond the immediate control of the levers of power were bound to try to reconcile the manifold religious ideas represented in their vast realm in the interest of internal peace and consolidation.

Another important element of Kanishka's heritage was the introduction of a new era which influenced the chronology of the history of India, central Asia and southeast Asia. The inscriptions of Kanishka and of his successors are dated according to this new era for the ninety-eight years which followed his accession to the throne. But dating this new era is a knotty problem and historians have yet to reach agreement. Several international Kushana conferences, in London in 1913 and 1960, at Dushanbe in Soviet central Asia in 1968 and in Vienna in 1996, have not settled the debate on this date. In 1913 there was a tendency to equate the beginning of this era with the Vikrama era. Kanishka thus would have acceded the throne in 58 BC. Then there was a new trend to equate it with the Shaka era which begins in AD 78. But in recent decades there has emerged still another school of thought which maintains that the Kanishka era must have begun sometime around AD 120 to 144.[3]

When and how Huvishka succeeded Kanishka is not yet quite clear. There are two inscriptions dated in the years 24 and 28 of the Kanishka era and found at Mathura and Sanchi respectively which mention a ruler called Vashishka. There is another inscription at Ara in the northwestern Panjab of the year 41 by a king called Kanishka. From the year 28 to the year 60 there exist a considerable number of inscriptions of Huvishka. Since Vashishka did not issue any coins of his own it is assumed that he ruled together with (his brother?) Huvishka. The Kanishka who was the author of the Ara inscription must have been a second Kanishka. This is also confirmed by the fact that he mentions that his father's name was Vashishka. For some years he may have shared a condominium with (his uncle?) Huvishka. Under these rulers the Kushana empire seems to have maintained the boundaries established by the first Kanishka. This is confirmed by the inscription at Surkh-Kotal in Bactria in the year 31 and

another one at the Wardak monastery near Kabul in the year 51 which mentions Maharaja Rajatiraja Huvishka.

The Ara inscription of Kanishka II is unique in Indian history because of another feature: he added to the usual titles of Maharaja Rajatiraja Devaputra the Roman title Kaisara. He probably did this following the Roman victory over their common enemy, the Parthians. This victory was achieved by Trajan in the years AD 114 to 117 and Mesopotamia and Assyria became Roman provinces for some time. Trajan himself crossed the river Tigris and reached the Persian Gulf. It is said that when he saw a ship there which was leaving for India he remembered Alexander's campaign and exclaimed: 'Oh, if I were young what would I have better liked to do but to march towards India.' As Dion Cassius reports in his history of Rome, Trajan had heard much about India because he had received many ambassadors of the 'barbarians' and 'especially of the Indians'. Those who advocate the year AD 78 as the beginning of the Kanishka era would find support in this coincidence of Trajan's campaign and the assumption of the title Kaisara by Kanishka II. The date of the Ara inscription (41 Kanishka era) would then correspond to AD 119 when the Roman emperor's success must have been of recent memory in India.

When the Kushanas were at the height of their power in northern India, a branch of the Shakas ruling the area between Saurashtra in Gujarat and Malwa, including Ujjain, in western central India rose to prominence once more. They retained their old Shaka title Kshatrapa and perhaps initially recognised the suzerainty of the Kushanas until they attained a position of regional hegemony under King Rudradaman in the second century AD. Together with the Kushanas in the north and the Shatavahanas in the south, they emerged as the third great power of Indian history at that time.

Rudradaman is known for his famous Junagadh inscription which is the first Sanskrit rock inscription (Ashoka's were written in Magadhi and later ones in Prakrit). In this inscription Rudradaman tells about a great tank whose wall was broken by a storm in the Shaka year 72 (AD 150). This tank, so he says, had originally been built by a provincial governor (*rashtriya*), Pushyagupta, under Chandragupta Maurya, and a canal (*pranali*) had been added to it by a Yavanaraja Tushaspha under Ashoka Maurya.[4] This would indicate that a Yavana king served as a governor under Ashoka (though his name, Tushaspha, seems to be of Persian rather than Greek origin). Rudradaman then goes on to tell about the victories he himself attained over the Shatavahana kings and over the tribe of the Yaudehas near present Delhi. This particular reference to a Rudradaman's northern campaign has been variously interpreted: those who maintain that the Kanishka era began in AD 78 say that the Kushana empire must have declined soon after his death; and those who suggest a later date (around AD 144) for Kanishka's accession to the throne contend that Rudradaman

Map 2.2 India *c.* AD 0–300

could not have conducted this campaign at the time when the Kushanas were in full control of northern India.

The last great Kushana emperor was Vasudeva whose inscriptions cover the period from the year 67 to the year 98 of the Kanishka era. He was the first Kushana ruler with an Indian name, an indication of the progressive assimilation of the Kushanas whose coins show more and more images of Hindu gods. There were some more Kushana rulers after Vasudeva, but we know very little about them. They have left no inscriptions, only coins. Moreover, the knotty problem of the Kanishka era does not yet permit us to correlate foreign reports about India in the age of the Kushanas (such as the Chinese and the Roman ones) with the reign of clearly identifiable Kushana rulers.

In central Asia and Afghanistan the Kushanas seem to have held sway until the early third century AD. In those regions their rule was only terminated when Ardashir, the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, vanquished the Parthians about AD 226 and then turned against the Kushanas, too. Ardashir I and his successor Shahpur I are credited with the conquest of the whole of Bactria and the rest of the Kushana domain in central Asia. Their provincial governors had the title Kushana Shah. In the valley of Kabul local Kushana princes could still be traced in the fifth century AD. In northwestern India some Kushana rulers also survived the decline of the western centre of their empire. The famous Allahabad inscription of the Gupta emperor, Samudragupta (about AD 335 to 375), reflects a faint reminiscence of the erstwhile glamour of the Kushanas: among the many rulers who acknowledged Samudragupta's power he also lists the Daivaputras Shahi Shahanushahis, who were obviously the successors of the great Kanishka.

The splendour of the 'dark period'

The five centuries which passed between the decline of the first great Indian empire of the Mauryas and the emergence of the great empire of the Guptas has often been described as a dark period in Indian history when foreign dynasties fought each other for short-lived and ephemeral supremacy over northern India. Apart from Kanishka's Indo-central Asian empire which could claim to be similar in size to Han China, the Parthians of Persia and to the contemporary Roman empire, this period did lack the glamour of large empires. But this 'dark period', particularly the first two centuries AD, was a period of intensive economic and cultural contact among the various parts of the Eurasian continent. India played a very active role in stimulating these contacts. Buddhism, which had been fostered by Indian rulers since the days of Ashoka, was greatly aided by the international connections of the Indo-Greeks and the Kushanas and thus rose to prominence in central Asia. South India was establishing its important links with the

West and with southeast Asia in this period. These links, especially those with southeast Asia, proved to be very important for the future course of Asian history.

But India itself also experienced important social and cultural changes in this period. For centuries Buddhism had enjoyed royal patronage. This was partly due to the fact that the foreign rulers of India found Buddhism more accessible than orthodox Hinduism with its caste barriers. The Vedic Brahmins had been pushed into the background by the course of historical development although Hinduism as such did not experience a decline. On the contrary, new popular cults arose around gods like Shiva, Krishna and Vishnu-Vasudeva who had played only a marginal role in an earlier age. The competition between Buddhism, which dominated the royal courts and cities, and orthodox Brahminism, which was still represented by numerous Brahmin families everywhere, left enough scope for these new cults to gain footholds of their own. Of great importance for the further development of Hinduism and particularly for the Hindu idea of kingship was the Kushana rulers' identification with certain Hindu gods – they were actually believed to attain a complete identity with the respective god after their death.

Religious legitimation was of greater importance to these foreign rulers than to other Indian kings. Menander's ashes had been distributed according to the Buddhist fashion, and Kanishka was identified with Mithras, but Wima Kadphises and Huvishka were closer to Shiva as shown by the images on their coins. Huvishka's coins provide a regular almanac of the iconography of the early Shiva cult. The deification of the ruler which was so prevalent in the Roman and Hellenistic world as well as among the Iranians was thus introduced into India and left a mark on the future development of Hindu kingship.

Another feature of crucial importance for the future political development of India was the organisation of the Shaka and Kushana empires. They were not centralised as the Maurya empire had been, but were based on the large-scale incorporation of local rulers. In subsequent centuries many regional empires of India were organised on this pattern.

The best-known contribution of the 'dark period' was, of course, to Indian art. After the early sculptures of the Mauryas which were greatly influenced by the Iranian style, a new Indian style had first emerged under the Shungas and their successors in the Buddhist monuments of Bharhut and Sanchi which particularly showed a new style of relief sculpture. The merger of the Gandhara school of art, with its Graeco-Roman style, and the Mathura school of art which included 'archaic' Indian elements and became the centre of Indo-Kushana art, finally led to the rise of the Sarnath school of art. This school then set the pattern of the classical Gupta style.

Less well-known, but much more important for the future development of Hindu society, was the compilation of the authoritative Hindu law books (*dharmashastra*), the foremost of them being the Code of Manu which

probably originated in the second or third century AD. After the breakdown of the Maurya and Shunga empires, there must have been a period of uncertainty which led to a renewed interest in traditional social norms. These were then codified so as to remain inviolate for all times to come. If we add to this the resurgence of Sanskrit, as testified by Rudradaman's famous rock inscription of the second century AD, we see that this 'dark period' actually contained all the elements of the classical culture of the Gupta age. Thus the much maligned 'dark period' was actually the harbinger of the classical age.

THE CLASSICAL AGE OF THE GUPTAS

Like the Mauryas a few centuries earlier, the imperial Guptas made a permanent impact on Indian history. In his Allahabad inscription, Samudragupta, the first great ruler of this dynasty, mentions one Maharaja Shri Gupta and one Ghatotkacha as his ancestors. But, except for these names, nothing else is mentioned in any other Gupta inscription nor have any coins been found which bear their names. They were probably local princelings somewhere around Allahabad or Varanasi. The Puranas report that the early Guptas controlled the area along the Ganges from Prayag (Allahabad) to Magadha. But Pataliputra and the centre of Magadha were certainly not within their reach.

The dynasty stepped into the limelight of history with Chandragupta I (AD 320 to about 335) who married a Licchavi princess. This marriage must have greatly contributed to the rise of the Guptas because the Licchavis were a mighty clan controlling most of north Bihar ever since the days of the Buddha. Chandragupta's coins show the king and his queen, Kumaradevi, and on the reverse a goddess seated on a lion with the legend 'Licchavi'. Samudragupta was also aware of the importance of this connection and in his famous Allahabad inscription he called himself 'son of the daughter of the Licchavi' rather than 'son of the Gupta'. Chandragupta introduced a new era starting with his coronation in AD 320 and he also assumed the title 'Overlord of great kings' (*maharaja-adhiraja*).

Chandragupta's son, Samudragupta (*c.* AD 335–375), earned a reputation as one of the greatest conquerors of Indian history. This is mainly due to the fact that his famous Allahabad inscription on an old Ashokan pillar withstood the ravages of time and thus preserved a glorious account of his deeds.[1] The inscription, which is undated, was perhaps initially located at Kausambi. It contains a long list of all kings and realms subdued by Samudragupta. Only half of the names on this list can be identified, but the rest provide us with a clear picture of Samudragupta's policy of conquest and annexation. In the 'land of the Aryas' (*aryavarta*) he uprooted (*unmulya*) many kings and princes between west Bengal in the east, Mathura

in the west and Vidisha in the southwest and annexed their realms. The old kingdom of Panchala north of the Ganges and many Naga (Snake) dynasties which had arisen in the area from Mathura to Vidisha after the decline of the Kushanas were eliminated in this way. The conquest of Pataliputra was also achieved in this first great campaign.

The most famous campaign of Samudragupta was aimed at southern India. Altogether twelve kings and princes of the south (*dakshinapatha*) are listed among those whom he subdued at that time. Many of them are known only due to their inclusion in this list which is thus one of the most important documents for the early history of southern India. In Dakshina Koshala he defeated King Mahendra, then he crossed the great forest region (Kalahandi and Koraput Districts of western Orissa) so as to reach the coast of Kalinga. In this region he defeated four rulers, among them Mahendra of Pishtapura in the Godaveri Delta and Hastivarman of Vengi. His final great success in the south was the defeat of King Vishnugopa of Kanchipuram. The inscription states that Samudragupta 'defeated, released and reinstated' all these kings thus showing his royal mercy. But this is probably a euphemism typical of the campaigns of early medieval Indian kings who were more interested in conquest as such than in the annexation of distant realms which they could not have controlled anyway. We may therefore assume that those southern kings ruled their realms undisturbed after Samudragupta had returned to the north where he celebrated his imperial round of conquest (*digvijaya*) with a great horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*). On this occasion he issued gold coins showing the sacrificial horse and on the reverse his chief queen. The coins have the legend: 'After conquering the earth the Great King of Kings with the strength of an invincible hero is going to conquer the heavens.' His grandson, Kumaragupta, praised him many decades later as the great renewer of the horse sacrifice which had been forgotten and neglected for such a long time. This shows that the Guptas consciously strove to renew the old Hindu institutions of kingship.

The Allahabad inscription also lists fourteen realms and tribes whose rulers are described as 'border kings' (*pratyanta-nripati*). These rulers paid tribute (*kara*) to Samudragupta and were prepared to follow his orders (*ajna*) and to show their obedience (*pramana*) by attending his court. The list includes Samatata (southeast Bengal), Kamarupa (Assam) and Nepal as well as tribal chieftaincies in eastern Rajasthan and northern Madhya Pradesh (e.g. Malwas, Abhiras and Yaudehas). Furthermore, some jungle rajas (*atavikaraja*) are mentioned whom Samudragupta had made his servants (*paricaraka*). The jungle rajas probably lived in the Vindhya mountains. Later inscriptions also mention eighteen such 'forest states' in this area. Another group of kings listed in the inscription are those independent rulers who lived beyond the realms of the border kings. The Kushanas (the Daivaputra Shahi Shahanushahi mentioned in the previous chapter),

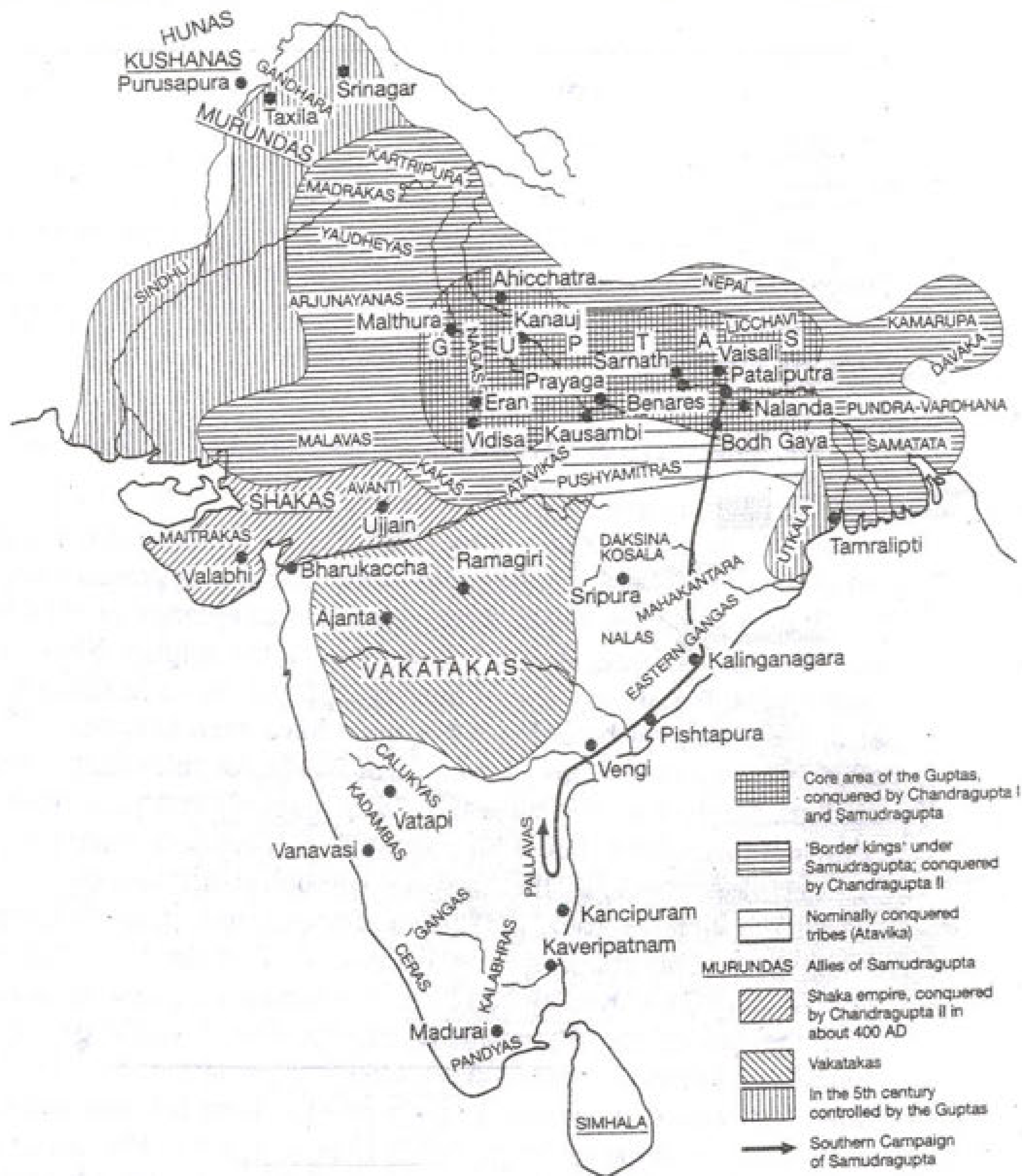
the Shakas, Murundas, as well as Simhala (Sri Lanka) and the inhabitants of 'all islands' are referred to in this context. It is stated that these independent rulers sent embassies to Samudragupta's court, donated girls for his harem and asked him for charters with the imperial Garuda Seal which would certify their legitimate title to their respective realms.

The Shakas or Kshatrapas of western India were subdued only by Samudragupta's successor after a long struggle. The Kushanas in north-western India, Gandhara and Afghanistan were certainly beyond Samudragupta's reach but they must have been interested in good diplomatic relations with him. The reference to Sri Lanka and the inhabitants of all islands seems to be rather strange in this context, but there is fortunately some Chinese evidence for Sri Lanka's relations with Samudragupta. According to a Chinese report, King Meghavanna of Sri Lanka had asked Samudragupta for his permission to build a monastery and a guesthouse for Buddhist pilgrims at Bodh Gaya. For this purpose Meghavanna must have sent an embassy with presents to Samudragupta which he considered to be a tribute just as the Chinese emperor would have done in a similar context. Diplomatic relations were established in this way without any effect on the actual exercise of political control.

The structure of the Gupta empire

From the very beginning, the Gupta empire revealed a structure which it retained even at the height of its expansion (see Map 2.3) and which served as a blueprint for all medieval kingdoms of India. The centre of the empire was a core area in which Samudragupta had uprooted all earlier rulers in two destructive wars (*prasabha-uddharana*, i.e. violent elimination). This area was under the direct administration of royal officers. Beyond this area lived the border kings some of whom Samudragupta even reinstated after they had been presumably subdued by some of their rivals. These border kings paid tribute and were obliged to attend Samudragupta's court. In contrast with medieval European vassals they were obviously not obliged to join Samudragupta's army in a war. Thus they were not real vassals but, at the most, tributary princes. In subsequent centuries these tributary neighbours were called Samantas and rose to high positions at the imperial court thus coming closer to the ideal type of a feudal vassal.

Between the realms of the border kings and the core region of the empire there were some areas inhabited by tribes which had hardly been subdued. Of course, Samudragupta claimed that he had made all forest rulers his servants, but he probably could not expect any tribute from them. At the most, he could prevent them from disturbing the peace of the people in the core region. Beyond the forest rulers and the tributary kings were the realms of the independent kings who, at the most, entered into diplomatic relations with the Guptas. In the course of further development several regions



Map 2.3 The Gupta empire (AD 320–500)

of the Gupta empire, e.g. Pundravardhana in Bengal and Avanti with its ancient capital Ujjain, emerged as powerful centres. Some historians therefore prefer to speak of a multicentred rather than a unitary structure of the Gupta state. The subsequent balance of power of medieval regional kingdoms was foreshadowed in this way.

In his southern campaign, Samudragupta passed the circle of forest rulers and border kings and ventured into regions which had been completely outside the Gupta Rajamandala. Although this 'conquest of the four quarters of the world' (*digvijaya*) did not immediately lead to an expansion of

the Gupta empire south of the Vindhyas, it did provide a new imperial dimension to Gupta rule. It also contributed to the ideological unification of India in terms of the idea of Hindu kingship. With his great horse sacrifices after his campaigns of conquest, Samudragupta announced his claim to be a universal ruler (*cakravartin*). Therefore the Allahabad inscription praised him in a way which would have been inconceivable in later times when similar inscriptions were much more restrained. The inscription states: 'He was a mortal only in celebrating the rites of the observances of mankind [but otherwise] a god (*deva*), dwelling on the earth.' Samudragupta's royal propaganda influenced his successors, as well as many later rulers of southern and central India who tried to emulate his grandiose style however small their realms might have been.

Subjection and alliance: Shakas and Vakatakas

Under Samudragupta's son, Chandragupta II (*c.* AD 375–413/15), the Gupta empire attained its greatest glory both in terms of territorial expansion and cultural excellence. Chandragupta combined the aggressive expansionist policy of his father with the strategy of marital alliance of his grandfather. His foremost success was his victory over the mighty Shaka-Kshatrapa dynasty and the annexation of their prosperous realm in Gujarat. The date of this event is not recorded but it must have been between 397 and 409: after 397 because for this year coins of the Shaka ruler Rudrasimha III are existent, and before 409 because Chandragupta II that year produced coins of a similar pattern but with the Shakas' Buddhist vihara replaced by Garuda, Vishnu's eagle, the favourite symbol of the Guptas.

Chandragupta's other great achievement was the marriage of his daughter, Prabhavatigupta, with Rudrasena II of the Vakataka dynasty of central India. This dynasty had risen to prominence in the third century AD after the fall of the Shatavahana empire. The founder of the Vakataka dynasty was named Vindhyashakti after the goddess of the Vindhya mountains. His second successor, Pravarasena I, whom his descendants praised as *samraj*, an imperial title, divided his kingdom. His sons ruled over two flourishing independent kingdoms in what is now Madhya Pradesh. The eastern Vakatakas were faced by Samudragupta's expansionism and shifted their capital to Nandivardhana near Nagpur under Rudrasena I. Chandragupta II concluded the marital alliance with Rudrasena's grandson before attacking the Shakas so as to be sure to have a friendly power at his back when invading Gujarat. But Rudrasena II died after a very short reign in 390 and, on Chandragupta's advice, Prabhavatigupta then acted as regent for her two sons, who were 2 and 5 years old. During her regency which lasted for 20 years the Vakataka realm was practically part of the Gupta empire. Under Pravarasena II (*c.*419–455) whose reign is very well documented by many inscriptions, the eastern Vakatakas reasserted their

independence. But the relations between the Guptas and the Vakatakas remained close and friendly. Therefore, historians sometimes refer to this whole period as the Vakataka–Gupta Age. The eastern Vakatakas propagated the idea of Hindu kingship by building a veritable state sanctuary at Ramagiri, adorned by monumental temples, whereas the western Vakatakas created the Buddhist marvels of Ajanta. Both dynasties contributed to the spread of Gupta culture in central and southern India.

Chandragupta II controlled most of northern India from the mouth of the Ganges to the mouth of the Indus and from what is now northern Pakistan down to the mouth of the Narmada. In alliance with the Vakatakas, he also controlled a large part of central India. Assam, Nepal, Kashmir and Sri Lanka retained good diplomatic relations with this vast new empire, as did many realms of southeast Asia where a new wave of Indian cultural influence set in. The oldest Sanskrit inscriptions found in Indonesia which testify to the establishment of kingdoms on the Indian pattern can be traced back to this period. The Gupta empire was at its zenith.

Direct access to the eastern and western ports had greatly augmented trade in northern and central India. The large number of beautiful gold coins issued by the Guptas testify to the growth of the imperial economy. Initially these coins, like those of the Kushanas, conformed to the Roman pattern and were accordingly called Dinara. Skandagupta later on diminished the gold content of these coins but at the same time he increased their weight from 7.8 grams to 9.3 grams in keeping with Indian standards. These impressive coins also served as a means of imperial propaganda with their god-like portrayals of the Gupta rulers. Chandragupta II also started producing silver coins following the tradition of the Shakas. At first he restricted this practice to western India, but soon these silver coins circulated throughout the empire. Copper coins and shells served as local currency.

The age of the Guptas was also a prosperous time for the many guilds (*shreni*) of northern India which were often entrusted with the management of towns or parts of cities. There are seals extant of the guilds of bankers (*shreshthin*), traders (*sarthavaha*) and artisans (*kulika*). Sometimes such seals were even combined and there may have been joint organisations which may have performed functions similar to those of chambers of commerce.

Faxian (Fah-hsien), the first of the three great Chinese pilgrims who visited India from the fifth to the seventh centuries, in search of knowledge, manuscripts and relics, arrived in India during the reign of Chandragupta II. As he was only interested in Buddhism his report does not contain much political information, but he does give a general description of northern India at that time:

> The region to the South is known as the Middle Kingdom. The people are rich and contented, unencumbered by any poll-tax or

> official restrictions. Only those who till the king's land pay a land tax, and they are free to go or stay as they please. The kings govern without recourse to capital punishment, but offenders are fined lightly or heavily according to the nature of their crime. Even those who plot high treason only have their right hands cut off. The king's attendants and retainers all receive emoluments and pensions. The people in this country kill no living creatures, drink no wine, and eat no onion or garlic. The single exception to this is the Chandalas, who are known as 'evil men' and are segregated from the others. When they enter towns or markets they strike a piece of wood to announce their presence, so that others may know they are coming and avoid them.[2]

Faxian's report provides an idea of general peace and welfare in Chandragupta's India. He also gives us some glimpses of political and economic affairs. Thus he mentions that all officers of the royal court received fixed salaries – just as Megasthenes had reported about the Maurya court. The method prevailing in later periods of assigning land and revenue in lieu of salaries was obviously unusual in the Gupta age when enough money was in circulation to pay salaries in cash. Faxian also refers to the freedom of the rural people which is in contrast with a later period when land grants often specifically mention the people who will till the soil for the grantee. The Chinese pilgrim also recorded evidence of the caste system as he could observe it. According to this evidence the treatment meted out to untouchables such as the Chandalas was very similar to that which they experienced in later periods. This would contradict assertions that this rigid form of the caste system emerged in India only as a reaction to the Islamic conquest.

Kalidasa and classical Sanskrit literature

The fame of the Guptas rests to a great extent on the flowering of classical Sanskrit literature under their patronage. It was reported in later ages that Chandragupta II had a circle of poets at his court who were known as the 'Nine Jewels'. The greatest jewel among them was Kalidasa who excelled as a dramatist as well as a composer of epic poems. Among his greatest works are the two epic poems *Kumarasambhava* and *Raghuvamsha*, the lyrical poem *Meghaduta* and the great drama, *Shakuntala*. Although we know so much about his magnificent work, we know next to nothing about the poet himself. Indian scholars earlier surmised that he was a contemporary of the legendary ruler Vikramaditya of Ujjain who instituted a new era beginning in 58 BC. But some references to astronomy in Kalidasa's work which show the influence of Greek and Roman ideas seem to indicate that the poet could not have lived before the early centuries AD. Furthermore

there is some internal evidence in his work which would seem to corroborate the assumption that he was a contemporary of Chandragupta II. The title of his epic poem *Vikramorvashiya* is supposed to be an allusion to Chandragupta's second name Vikramaditya, and the *Kumarasambhava* which praises the birth of the war god, Kumara, may refer to Chandragupta's son and successor, Kumaragupta. The fourth book of the *Raghuvamsha* which glorifies the mythical dynasty of King Rama could be a eulogy of the deeds of Samudragupta. This transformation of history into myth was in keeping with the programme of the Gupta rulers. Whereas in earlier periods the ruler was seen as executing the immutable laws of a cosmic world order, the Gupta rulers were praised as gods on earth bringing about peace and prosperity by means of their heroic deeds.

Another category of Sanskrit literature which is of lesser literary merit than the great classical works but has nevertheless made an enormous impact on Indian life are the Puranas. These 'Old (Purana) Works' have earlier sources but they most probably attained their final shape in the Age of the Guptas. The Purana contain collections of myths, philosophical dialogues, ritual prescriptions, but also genealogies of northern and central Indian dynasties up to the early Guptas. They are therefore also important as historical sources. For the various sects of Hinduism they provide a storehouse of myths about different gods as well as legends concerning the holy places of the Hindus. There are altogether eighteen Great Puranas and eighteen Lesser Puranas which were frequently amended up to late medieval times. The Vishnu Purana is one of the most important religious books of the Vaishnavas. The devotees of the goddess, Durga, find a magnificent account of her deeds in the Devimahatmya which is a part of the Markandeya Purana. The fight of the goddess against the buffalo demon, Mahisha, is vividly portrayed in this text. The various incarnations (*avatara*) of Vishnu as well as the deeds of Durga are frequently depicted in the sculptures of the Gupta Age.

An age of religious tolerance and political consolidation

During the long reign of Chandragupta's son, Kumaragupta (415–455), the empire remained undiminished but there are no reports about additional conquests. Kumaragupta's rule was obviously a peaceful one and cultural life continued to flourish and to extend its influence into the distant parts of the subcontinent and southeast Asia. Although Kumaragupta was a devotee of Vishnu like his predecessors and had to pay his respects to Kumaraskanda, the god of war and his namesake, his reign was characterised by a spirit of religious tolerance.

Inscriptions registering endowments for the holy places of Buddhism and Jainism as well as for the Hindu gods like Vishnu, Shiva, Skanda and the

sun god, Surya, and for the goddess, Shakti, abound in all parts of the empire. Gold coins were donated to Buddhist monasteries with detailed instructions for the use of the interest accruing on the investment of this capital. Thus monks were to be maintained or oil procured for the sacred lamps or buildings were to be added or repaired, etc. The Buddhist monasteries retained their functions as banks in this way. But they were very much dependent on the rich citizens of the cities and towns of the empire. As these cities and towns declined in the late Gupta period this also greatly affected the fortunes of those monasteries. More secure were the donations to Brahmins and Hindu temples which took the form of land grants or of the assignment of the revenue of whole villages. Several such grants inscribed on copper plates were made during the reign of Kumaragupta. Five sets of copper plates, from 433 to 449, were found in Bengal alone. All referred to land granted to Brahmins for the performance of specific rites. One inscription provided for the maintenance and service of a Vishnu temple. Most of these grants referred to uncultivated land which indicates that the grantees had to function as colonisers who not only propagated the glory of their royal donors but also extended the scope of agriculture.

After nearly a century of rapid expansion, Kumaragupta's reign was a period of consolidation in which the administrative structure of the empire attained its final shape. It thus served as the model for the successor states of the Gupta empire. From inscriptions in Bengal we get the impression that the central region of the empire was divided into a number of provinces (*bhukti*) headed by a governor (*uparika*) who was appointed by the Gupta ruler himself. Sometimes these governors even had the title of Uparikamaharaja. The provinces were subdivided into districts (*vishaya*) headed by a Vishayapati. Districts close to the realm's capital were likely to have their heads directly appointed by the ruler. In distant provinces they were usually appointed by the governor. Larger provinces were subdivided into Vishayas and Vithis. But we do not know whether this rather centralised administration in Bengal existed also in other provinces of the Gupta empire.

At the lowest echelon there were the villages and towns which enjoyed a great deal of local autonomy quite in contrast with the instructions of the *Arthashastra*. Bigger cities had Ayuktakas at their head who were appointed by the governor. These Ayuktakas were assisted by town clerks (*pustapala*). The head of the city guilds (*nagarashreshthin*) and the heads of families of artisans (*kulika*) advised the Ayuktaka. In the villages there were headman (*gramika*) also assisted by scribes, and there were the heads of peasant families (*kutumbin*). The district officer rarely interfered with village administration but he was in charge of such transactions as the sale and transfer of land which are mentioned in many documents relating to land grants. The district administration was obviously of great importance and encompassed judicial functions (*adhikarana*).

Internal and external challenges: Pushyamitras and Huns

At the end of Kumaragupta's reign the Gupta empire was challenged by the Pushyamitras, a tribal community living on the banks of the Narmada. Skandagupta, a son and general of Kumaragupta, fought these Pushyamitras and in his later inscriptions he emphasised that the Pushyamitras had shaken the good fortunes of the Gupta dynasty and that he had to try his utmost to subdue them. Obviously such tribes living near the core area of the empire could seriously challenge the ruling dynasty. But Skandagupta may have had good reasons to highlight his role in this affair. He had usurped his father's throne by displacing the legitimate crown prince, Purugupta. As Skandagupta only mentioned his father's but never his mother's name in his inscriptions it can be assumed that his mother was a junior queen or concubine. In later genealogies of the Guptas, Skandagupta's name does not appear. The stigma of the usurper was not removed by the fact that he was a very competent ruler. Coins and inscriptions covering the period from 455 to 467 show that he was in control of the empire in this period and one, dated 458, explicitly states that he posted guards in all parts of the empire.

His vigilance enabled Skandagupta to successfully meet another and probably much more serious challenge to the Gupta empire when the Xiongnu or Huns descended upon India from central Asia where they had fought the Yuezhi in the second century BC. In the middle of the fourth century AD, the Huns invaded the Sassanid empire in Persia and then attacked the Alans and Goths living west of the Volga thus starting the great migration in Europe. Other tribes of the Huns remained in Bactria where they joined with other nomadic tribes and under a great leader, Kidara, who emerged as a powerful ruler towards the end of the fourth century. A new wave of aggressive Huns pushed these people farther south in the beginning of the fifth century. They crossed the Hindukush mountains and descended upon the Indian plains. In about 460, only a few years after the famous Hun ruler, Attila, was defeated in Europe, they seem to have clashed with Skandagupta. In the same inscription in which Skandagupta mentioned his victory over the Pushyamitras he also claims to have vanquished the Huns and in another inscription he again refers to victories over the foreigners (*mleccha*). Sassanid and Roman sources contain no reports of victories of the Huns in India and thus it seems that Skandagupta succeeded in thwarting the first attacks of the Huns on India. But this struggle disrupted the international trade of northwestern India and thus diminished one of the most important financial sources of the Gupta empire.

Skandagupta died around 467, and there was a long drawn-out war of succession between his sons and the sons of his half-brother, Purugupta. The winner of this war was Budhagupta, the son of Purugupta and the last of the great Gupta rulers. During his long reign (467 to 497) the empire remained more or less intact, but the war of succession had obviously

sapped its vitality. The successors of Budhagupta, his brother Narasimha and Narasimha's son and grandson, who ruled until about 570, controlled only small parts of the empire. In east Bengal a King Vainyagupta is mentioned in an inscription of 507 and in the west one Bhanugupta left an inscription of 510. It is not known whether these rulers were related to the Gupta dynasty or not, but they were obviously independent of the Guptas of Magadha whose power declined very rapidly.

The Huns must have noted this decline as they attacked India once more under their leader, Toramana. They conquered large parts of northwestern India up to Gwalior and Malwa. In 510 they clashed with Bhanugupta's army at Eran (Madhya Pradesh). Bhanugupta's general, Goparaja, lost his life in this battle. Coins provide evidence for the fact that Toramana controlled the Panjab, Kashmir, Rajasthan and presumably also the western part of what is now Uttar Pradesh. About 515 Toramana's son, Mihirakula, succeeded his father and established his capital at Sakala (Sialkot).

In this way northwestern India once more became part of a central Asian empire which extended from Persia to Khotan. Not much is known about the rule of the Huns in India. There is a Jaina tradition that Toramana embraced that faith. The Kashmir chronicle, *Rajatarangini*, reports that Toramana led his army also to southern India, but since this source originated many centuries later, the accuracy of this report cannot be taken for granted. All sources highlight the cruelty of Hun warfare and of their oppression of the indigenous people: a Chinese ambassador at the Hun court at Gandhara wrote such a report about 520; the Greek seafarer, Cosmas, also called Indicopleustes, recorded similar facts around 540; and finally the Chinese pilgrim, Xuanzang (Hsiuen-tsang), wrote about it from hindsight around 650. Hun rule in India was very short-lived. Yashodharman, a local ruler of Malwa, won a battle in 528 against Mihirakula who then withdrew to Kashmir where he died a few years later. But the final decline of the Huns in India was precipitated by their defeat at the hands of the Turks in central Asia around the middle of the sixth century.

Hun rule was one of the shortest instances of foreign rule over northwestern India, but it had far-reaching consequences. The Huns destroyed what was left of the Gupta empire in the northwest and the centrifugal forces were set free. They destroyed the cities and trading centres of northern India. Not much research has been done on this aspect of the Hun invasion but it seems that the classical northwestern Indian urban culture was eradicated by them. The Buddhist monasteries in the Hun territory also succumbed to this assault and never recovered. A further effect of the Hun invasion was the migration of other central Asian tribes to India where they joined local tribes. The Gurjaras and some Rajput clans seem to have originated in this way and they were soon to make a mark in Indian history. The Classical Age waned and the medieval era began with the rise of these new actors on the political scene of northern India.

THE RISE OF SOUTH INDIA

South India is separated from north India by the Vindhya mountains and the Narmada river and large tracts of barren and inhospitable land. The Deccan, particularly the central and western highlands and the 'far south', the Dravida country, had a history of its own. Cultural influences, however, were as often transmitted from northwestern India via the western highlands down to the south as along the Gangetic valley to eastern India. But, in spite of early influences from the north, the 'far south' remained rather isolated and could develop in its own way. However, in later centuries cultural influences from the south, like the great Bhakti movement, also made an impact on northern India.

The most important impact on the south was, of course, the spread of Late Vedic culture from the north. Scholars refer to this in different terms: Aryanisation, Sanskritisation, Hinduisation. But none of these terms can do justice to the complex transmission of cultural influences. During the early centuries AD north Indian culture had ceased to be a purely 'Aryan' culture and it was transmitted not only by those who spoke Sanskrit; in this early period of the last centuries BC Buddhists and Jainists speaking Pali and Prakrit were as important in this process as Brahmins who propagated various forms of Hinduism. In due course the Dravidian languages of the south absorbed a great many Sanskrit words and became themselves media for the expression of new cultural values.

Brahmin families who continued to transmit sacred texts orally from one generation to another were certainly of great importance in this context. They penetrated the south peacefully and made an impact by setting an example rather than by converting people. But the process of Hinduisation was also accompanied by the oppression and exploitation of former tribal groups as well as pariahs and untouchables within the caste society. Brahmins provided a justification and legitimation for the hierarchical structuring of society which was particularly useful to local rulers who emerged from a tribal status. The Brahmins brought along the ideology of Hindu kingship which such rulers eagerly adopted. The Brahmins literally put the tribal people in their place. They could recite the verses of the *Mahabharata* which state that it is the duty of tribes to lead a quiet life in the forest, to be obedient to the king, to dig wells, to give water and food to travellers and gifts to the Brahmins in such areas where they could 'domesticate' the tribal people.

South Indian geopolitics

The history of south India was determined by the contrast of highland and coastal lowland. At the height of the early medieval period this became very obvious when the great regional kingdoms of the southeast (Pallavas

and Cholas) and of the western highlands (Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas) vied with each other for the control of the large rivers flowing from west to east. The fertile delta of Krishna and Godaveri was particularly coveted by rival powers.

Prehistoric finds in northern and southern India mostly indicate that open areas in the interior of the country were preferred by early settlers whereas the early civilisations were based on the great river plains of the Indus and Ganges. The early history of the south was very much influenced by the proximity of the sea and the early historical development in the southeast centred on the coast. Settled agriculture and the growing of rice made the coastal plains around the mouths of the great rivers much more attractive. Social differentiation and political organisation started with the need for defence against raiders. The early nuclear areas along the great rivers were initially isolated from each other by large stretches of forest or barren lands. They could thus give rise to local principalities. At the same time these principalities could profit from maritime trade.

South India was known even in very ancient times as a rich land to which, according to the Bible, King Solomon may have sent his ships once every three years carrying gold, silver, ivory, monkeys and peacocks. Megasthenes reported that in the late fourth century BC the wealth of the Pandya rulers of the south was derived from the trade with pearls. The *Arthashastra* lists shells, diamonds and other precious stones, pearls and articles made of gold as south Indian products. Initially this kind of trade may have been of marginal importance only but in due course it contributed to economic growth. The organisation of trade accelerated the political development of the coastal nuclear areas and the local rulers gradually extended their sway over the surrounding countryside. It is significant in this context that ancient geographers like Ptolemy in the second century AD mention not only the ports of southern India but also the capitals of rulers located at some distance from the coast.

Five types of regional ecology

The pattern of gradual penetration of the hinterland of the southeast coast is clearly reflected in ancient Tamil literature. In the texts of the Sangam period five eco-types (*tinai*) are mentioned again and again. These types are: the mountains, forests and pastures, dry, barren land, the valleys of the great rivers, and the coast. These different eco-types were not only characterised by the particular plants and animals found there but also by different modes of economic activity and social structure.[1]

The mountainous region (*kurrinci*) was the habitat of hunters and food gatherers like the tribe of the Kuruvars. Below this region there was the forest and brushland (*mullai*) which also served as pasture for tribes of herdsmen like the Ayar. Agriculture was scarce in this area where only

millets would grow. Rice was introduced later and only in the small areas which offered conditions similar to those prevailing in the great valleys.

The Sangam texts indicate that the relations between the hunters of the mountains and the forests and the herdsmen in the adjacent region were often strained. They did share the same religious cults of Muruga, Lord of the Mountains, who was also worshipped as the god of war by the herdsmen. But constant cattle raids were a source of conflict here just as they had been in northern India in the Vedic Age. The Sangam literature abounds with stories about such cattle raids, the term for such a raid being synonymous with that for war.

The third ecotype, the dry, barren land (*palai*) was a transitional zone which often expanded in great droughts. This was a region to which robbers would withdraw and was thus feared by travellers.

The most important of the five types was the fourth one, the river valleys (*marutam*). Natural and artificial irrigation by means of canals, tanks and wells made rice cultivation possible in this area. Artisans and settled agriculturists, like the caste of the Vellalas, lived here and later the kings settled Brahmins in this fertile region who established whole Brahmin villages. These villages were usually located in the region which is below 300 feet above sea level. These river valleys with their well-developed agriculture and high population were the nuclear areas which formed the base of all regional kingdoms of south India.

The fifth eco-type, the coast (*neytal*) was an area where the people made a living by fishing, trading and making salt. Local trade consisted initially only of exchanging fish and salt for rice and milk products, but in the first centuries AD international maritime trade became more and more important for the coastal people. This is why both literary and archaeological evidence point to a higher degree of urbanisation in the coastal region than in the river valleys in this early period.

Sangam literature, just like late Vedic and early Buddhist literature, reflects the transition from tribal society to settled agriculture and early state formation. Even at this very early stage, social stratification in the river valleys of southern India shows traces of a caste system which then becomes increasingly rigid as Brahmin immigrants gain more and more influence and provide the justification for it. But in the early times, even the higher castes were not yet hemmed in by the rigid norms and conventions of a later age. The Sangam texts contain vivid descriptions of the uninhibited life in the early capitals of south Indian rulers, particularly in the Pandya capital, Madurai.

The political development of south India was greatly stimulated by the contact with the first great Indian empire of the Mauryas in the third century BC. The tribal rulers of the south thus gained an insight into new types of administration and large-scale state formation. Trade with northern India added to this flow of information, and so did the migration of Buddhist and Jaina monks who introduced their forms of monastic organisation in central

and southern India. Interregional trade and these highly developed monastic institutions often maintained a symbiotic relationship which was of great importance for the emergence of the political infrastructure of these early states of the south.

Kharavela of Orissa and the Andhra Shatavahanas

The history of central and south India in the centuries after the death of Ashoka is still relatively unknown. Thus the dating of the two major dynasties which emerged south of the Vindhyas after the decline of the Maurya dynasty, the Shatavahanas of Central India and the dynasty of Kharavela of Orissa, is as yet very uncertain. It was initially assumed that both emerged soon after the decline of the Maurya empire around 185 BC, but more recent research seems to indicate that they arose only around the middle of the first century BC.

Kharavela, one of the great rulers of ancient India, has left a detailed record of his deeds in the inscription found in the Jaina cave at Udayagiri near Bhubaneshwar. He called himself 'Supreme Lord of Kalinga' (*Kalinga-adhipati*) and he was probably a member of the Chedi dynasty which had migrated from eastern Madhya Pradesh to Orissa. Kharavela was a true chakravartin though he was a Jaina and should have believed in the doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*). In his campaign against the rulers of northern India he got beyond Magadha and so frightened a Greek (Yavana) king who lived northwest of this area that he took to his heels. Marching westward, Kharavela entered the realm of the Shatavahana king, Satakarni, and, turning south, he defeated a confederation of Dravidian rulers (*Tamiradeha sanghata*).

The spoils of the many successful campaigns which Kharavela conducted almost every year seem to have made him so rich that by the sixth year of his reign he could afford to abolish all taxes payable by the citizens of towns (*paura*) and the rural folk (*janapada*) in his realm. The inscription also contains the interesting news that Kharavela reintroduced the sixty-four arts of song, dance and instrumental music (*tauryatrika*) which had been prohibited by the Mauryas. This testifies to the fact that Ashoka's Dhamma-Mahamatras had successfully implemented the imperial orders even in distant Orissa.

Kharavela's far-flung realm, which included large parts of eastern and central India, seems to have disintegrated soon after his death as had happened to the Maurya empire after Ashoka's death. Only his son and another member of the dynasty have left us some rather unimportant inscriptions. But it might be this empire about which Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) wrote in his *Naturalis historia*: 'The royal city of the Calingae is called Parthalis [i.e. Toshali]. This king had 66,000 foot soldiers, 1,000 horses and 700 elephants, always caparisoned, ready for battle.'

The central Indian state of the Shatavahana dynasty showed a much greater continuity and stability than Kharavela's short-lived realm. The Purana texts even maintain that the dynasty ruled for 460 years, but these texts do not always provide reliable historical evidence. Nothing is known about the antecedents of this dynasty which belonged to the great central Indian tribe of the Andhras, according to the Puranas. This tribe is listed among the non-Aryan tribes in the Aitareya Brahmana text of about 500 BC.

Satakarni I, who seems to be identical with the king mentioned in Kharavela's inscription, was the first great ruler of this dynasty. He claimed to have fought against the Greeks and Shakas in the west and northwest and then extended his kingdom to the east along the river Godaveri. His capital, Pratisthana (Paithan), was located on the banks of the Godaveri in what is now the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Due to this advance along the Godaveri towards the southeast he could proudly call himself 'Lord of the South' (*dakshinapatha-pati*). Pliny reports that in his time the Andarae, as he calls the Shatavahanas, had 30 fortified cities, 100,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry and even 9,000 war elephants. They were thus the strongest power in southern India. Nevertheless they were deprived of the central part of their realm on the upper Godaveri by the Shakas who were pushed to the south by the Kushanas.

Only King Gautamiputra was able to restore the Shatavahana realm to its earlier greatness in about AD 125. Gautamiputra's son, Vasishthiputra, alias Shri Pulumavi, ruled the Shatavahana kingdom around AD 140 at the time of Ptolemy, who referred to Shri Pulumavi as Shri Polemaios. The Shatavahanas had consolidated their hold on the east while being forced to concentrate on it for nearly a century until they could reclaim the western part once more. As their empire then stretched more or less from coast to coast they became very important for international trade which linked west and east Asia (see Map 2.2).

The Shatavahana inscriptions contain some information about their administrative system, but details are missing. The empire was divided into districts (*ahara*) headed by imperial officers (*amatya*) who probably had functions similar to the Mahamatras of the Maurya empire. We do not know whether there was an additional level of administration or not. In general, the Shatavahanas seem to have copied the Maurya system of administration with the important difference that they tried to take local interests into account and inducted allodial lords into their administration hierarchy. Furthermore, cities and guilds enjoyed a great deal of autonomy under Shatavahana rule. This was an important feature of later south Indian realms, too. The incorporation of local lords into the state hierarchy was a general feature of state formation in early medieval India.

Two other specific features, or perhaps even innovations, of the Shatavahana system were the distribution of military garrisons throughout the empire and the practice of granting land to Brahmins while at the same

time providing them with immunities (*parihara*). Both of these institutions were obviously designed to penetrate the countryside with royal agents. The officers (*gaulmika*) heading the garrisons had some local administrative functions and, as the garrisons were to be self-supporting, had to secure the necessary resources from the local people. This in turn made it necessary to exempt Brahmins and Buddhist monasteries, to whom land was granted very specifically, from such exactions by royal officers. Consequently, the grant of such immunities became part and parcel of the land grant.

The Shatavahana system was not based on a centralised bureaucracy but on a network of noblemen who had such grandiloquent titles as 'Great Lord of the Army' (*mahasenapati*). Recent research has established that there were many local and subregional centres which must have formed a kind of federation under Shatavahana rule. Brahmins and Buddhist monasteries probably served as countervailing forces to the potentially centrifugal forces of local magnates. The Shatavahanas were Hindus but they nevertheless provided a great deal of patronage to the Buddhist order. Perhaps the good connections between monasteries and guilds also recommended the Buddhist order to the rulers who benefited from international trade.

Shatavahana power declined in the third century, showing symptoms typical of the final stages of all Indian kingdoms. Local princes strove for independence and finally a series of small successor states emerged. The northern part of the empire remained under the control of one branch of the Shatavahanas for some time until the Vakatakas rose to prominence in this region; they then entered into the alliance with the Gupta empire.

The eastern part of the Shatavahana empire, especially the fertile delta region of Krishna and Godaveri, was then ruled by the short-lived Ikshvaku dynasty. The founder of this dynasty celebrated the great horse sacrifice obviously in order to declare his independence from his Shatavahana overlord. The Ikshvakus continued the policy of the Shatavahanas in extending their patronage both to Brahmins and to the Buddhist order. Inscriptions belonging to the reign of the second Ikshvaku king which were found in the monasteries at Nagarjunikonda show that even the queens made donations to the Buddhists. One of these inscriptions gives evidence of international relations of the monastery: Kashmir and Gandhara, the Yavanas (Greeks) in northwestern India are mentioned, also Kirata in the Himalayas (Nepal?), Vanavasi in western India, Toshali and Vanga (Orissa and Bengal) in the east, Damila (Tamil Nadu), the Island of Tamrapani (Sri Lanka) and even China. This shows to what extent Buddhism added an international dimension to the polity of India's early regional kingdoms.

In the beginning of the fourth century the delta region of Krishna and Godaveri was already in the hands of a governor appointed by the Pallava dynasty of Kanchipuram and the Ikshvakus had disappeared. Not much is known about south Indian history in this period except what Samudragupta

reported about his southern campaign in his famous Allahabad inscription. Vishnugopa of Kanchi (Kanchipuram) and Hastivarman of Vengi, probably a ruler of the local Shalankayana dynasty are mentioned in this inscription but we have no other evidence of their life and times.

Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras

The early history of the 'far south' is the history of the three tribal principalities of the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras. They are mentioned in Ashoka's inscriptions of the third century BC, in some brief Tamil inscriptions of the second century BC (written in Brahmi script like the Ashokan inscriptions) and in Kharavela's inscription of the first century BC. The Sangam literature of the Tamils sheds a great deal of light on this period. Archaeological discoveries and the reports of ancient European authors provide additional evidence, particularly with regard to maritime trade. The chronicles of Sri Lanka contain many references to the fights between the kings of Sri Lanka and the kings of southern India. Compared to the sources available for other regions in early Indian history, this is a wealth of source material. Sangam literature was named after the 'academies' (*sangam*) of Madurai and its environs where poets worked under the patronage of the Pandya kings. Some traditionalist historians have maintained that these works were composed from about 500 BC to AD 500, but more recent research has shown that they were probably composed in the first to the third centuries AD, the second century being the most active period. The famous Tamil grammar, *Tolkappiyam*, is considered to belong to the beginning of this whole period (parts of it date back to *c*.100 BC) and the great Tamil epic poem, *Shilappatikaram*, to its very end, perhaps even to the fifth or sixth centuries AD.

North Indian royal titles (e.g. *adhiraja*) gained more and more currency in the south in this period but the early south Indian kings seem to have derived their legitimation from tribal loyalties and the network of their respective clan. This sometimes implied the division of power among many members of the clan. The Chera kingdom of the southwest coast (Kerala) must have been such a large-scale family enterprise. Kautalya has referred to this system of government in his *Arthashastra*; he called it *kulasangha* and thought that it was quite efficient. Among the Pandyas and Cholas the monarch seems to have played a more important role. This was particularly true of the Chola king, Karikala, who ruled over a relatively large area around AD 190 after he had vanquished a federation of the Pandyas and Cheras. Even about 1,000 years later the Chola rulers still referred to this great ancestor and they attributed to him the building of dikes along the banks of the Kaveri and the decoration of Kanchipuram with gold. Karikala's policy was obviously aimed at extending the territorial base of the Cholas at the expense of the other tribal principalities, but this policy

seems to have alienated the people who threatened to flee from Karikala's domains so that he had to make concessions to them.

At the end of the Sangam era the development of the three southern kingdoms was suddenly interrupted by the invasion of the Kalabhras. Historians have called the period which started with this invasion the 'Kalabhra Interregnum'. It ended only when the Pallava dynasty emerged as the first major regional power of south India in the sixth century. Nothing is known about the origins or tribal affiliations of the Kalabhras. In early medieval Tamil literature they are depicted as 'bad kings' (*kaliarashar*) who disrupted the order of the tribal kingdoms of coastal south India and in the river valleys. It is said that they destroyed legitimate kings and even cancelled land grants to Brahmins. Buddhist literature, however, contains some information about a Kalabhra king, Acchutavikkanta, under whose patronage Buddhist monasteries and poets prospered. A Jaina grammarian quoted some of Acchutavikkanta's poems even in the tenth century. The Kalabhras were probably a mountain tribe of southern India which suddenly swooped down on the kingdoms of the fertile lowlands. The kings who headed this tribe must have been followers of Buddhism and Jainism. In a later period of south Indian history a similar process occurred when the Hoysalas, a highland tribe, emerged at the time when the Chola empire declined. They were also at first depicted as highwaymen who disturbed the peace of the settled Hindu kingdoms. But, unlike the Kalabhras, once the Hoysalas had established their rule they turned into orthodox supporters of Hinduism.

International trade and the Roman connection

An important aspect of early south Indian history was the flourishing trade with Rome. The first two centuries AD were an important time for the trade links between Asia and Europe. In addition to earlier Greek reports, the Roman references to the trade with India provided the information on which the European image of India was based. The European discovery of India in the late medieval period by people like Marco Polo was in effect only a rediscovery of that miraculous country which was known to the ancient writers but had been cut off by the Arabs from direct contact with the West for several centuries. Hegel commented on the trade with India in his *Philosophy of History*: 'The quest for India is a moving force of our whole history. Since ancient times all nations have directed their wishes and desires to that miraculous country whose treasures they coveted. These treasures were the most precious on earth: treasures of nature, pearls, diamonds, incense, the essence of roses, elephants, lions etc. and also the treasures of wisdom. It has always been of great significance for universal history by which route these treasures found their way to the West, the fate of nations has been influenced by this.'[2]

For India itself the trade with the West flourished most in ancient times. But when India's trade with Rome declined in the third and fourth century AD, India, and especially southern India, turned to southeast Asia where Indian influence became much more important than the vague impression which India had made on the nations of the West.

Indian trade with the countries around the Mediterranean goes back far into the pre-Christian era. But this early trade was probably conducted mainly by isolated seafaring adventurers even though the Ptolemies of Egypt had tried for some time to gain access to the trade in the Indian Ocean. It was only under Emperor Augustus (30 BC to AD 14) that this trade suddenly attained much greater dimensions. The Roman annexation of Egypt opened up to the trade route through the Red Sea. Furthermore, after a century of civil war, Rome experienced a period of greater prosperity which increased demand for the luxury goods of the East, a demand which could not be met by means of the old cumbersome method of coastal shipping. Hippalus' discovery early in the first century AD that the monsoon could take a ship straight across the Arabian Sea shortened the trade route and greatly eased access to the goods of the East. In subsequent years there was a great spurt of trading activity which was paralleled only many centuries later by the renewed European trade with India after Vasco da Gama's voyage of 1498.

A comparison of Strabo's geography which was written at the time of Augustus (edited and amended between AD 17 and 23) with the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* which was written by an anonymous Greek merchant in the second half of the first century AD shows a great increase in Roman trade with India. Strabo was more interested in northern India and in the ports between the mouth of the Indus and present Bombay and he reported next to nothing about southern India, Sri Lanka and the east coast of India. The author of the *Periplus*, who probably visited India personally, described in detail the ports of the Malabar coast. When Ptolemy wrote his geography around AD 150 Roman knowledge of India had increased even more. He wrote about the east coast of India and also had a vague idea of southeast Asia, especially about 'Chryse', the 'Golden Country' (*suvarnabhumi*) as the countries of southeast Asia had been known to the Indians since the first centuries AD. However, recent research has shown that this so-called Roman trade was integrated into an already flourishing Asian network of coastal and maritime trade.

The most important port of the Malabar coast was Muziris (Cranganore near Cochin) in the kingdom of Cerobothra (Cheraputra), which 'abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia and by the Greeks'. The *Periplus* reported on Roman trade with Malabar:

> They send large ships to the market-towns on account of the great quantity and bulk of pepper and malabathrum [cinnamon]. There

> are imported here, in the first place, a great quantity of coin; topaz, thin clothing, not much; figured linens, antimony, coral, crude glass, copper, tin, lead, wine, not much, but as much as at Barygaza [Broach]; realgar and orpiment; and wheat enough for the sailors, for this is not dealt in by the merchants there. There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity in only one region near these markets, a district called Cottonora [north Małabar?]. Besides this there are exported great quantities of fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, spikenard from the Ganges, malabathrum from the places in the interior, transparent stones of all kinds, diamonds and sapphires, and tortoise shell; that from Chryse Island, and that taken among the islands along the coast of Damirica [Tamil Nadu]. They make the voyage to this place in favourable season who set out from Egypt about the month of July, that is Epiphi.[3]

This provides evidence for a great volume of trade in both directions. It also indicates that the south Indian ports served as entrepôts for silk from China, oil from the Gangetic plains which was brought by Indian traders all the way to the tip of southern India, and also for precious stones from southeast Asia. But, as far as the eastern trade was concerned, the Coromandel coast to the south of present Madras soon eclipsed the Malabar coast. To the north of Cape Comorin (Kanya Kumari) there was the kingdom of the Pandyas where prisoners were made to dive for precious pearls in the ocean. Still further north there was a region called Argaru which was perhaps the early Chola kingdom with its capital, Uraiyur. The important ports of this coast were Kamara (Karikal), Poduka (Pondichery) and Sopatma (Supatama) (see Map 2.2). Many centuries later European trading factories were put up near these places: the Danes established Tranquebar near Karikal, the French Pondichery, and the British opted for Madras which was close to Supatama.

The British archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler discovered in 1945 the remnants of an ancient port near the fishing village Arikamedu about 2 miles south of Pondichery. The great number of Roman items found there seems to indicate that this was Poduka of the Periplus, called 'New Town' (*Puducceri*) in Tamil. Brick foundations of large halls and terraces were found, also cisterns and fortifications. Shards of Roman ceramics were identified as Red Polish Ware which Wheeler tried to trace to Arezzo in Italy where it was produced between 30 BC and AD 45. The finds of Arikamedu conjure up the image of a flourishing port just like Kaveripatnam as described in an epic poem of the Sangam era:

> The sun shone over the open terraces, over the warehouses near the harbour and over the turrets with windows like eyes of deer. In different places of Puhar the onlooker's attention was caught by the

> sight of the abodes of Yavanas, whose prosperity never waned. At the harbour were to be seen sailors from many lands, but to all appearances they live as one community.[4]

This Kaveripatnam situated at the mouth of the Kaveri was probably identical with the emporium of Khaberis described by Ptolemy.

The trade with Rome brought large numbers of Roman gold coins to southern India. In contrast with the Kushanas who melted down all Roman coins and reissued them in their own name, the rulers of south India did not do this but simply defaced the coins. A sharp cut across the face of the Roman emperor indicated that his sovereignty was not recognised but his coins were welcome and would be accepted according to their own intrinsic value. Just as in later periods, the Indians imported very few goods but were eager to get precious metals, so the quest for Roman gold was a driving force of India's international trade in ancient times. The Periplus reported this influx of coins and a text of the Sangam era highlights this, too: 'The beautifully built ships of the Yavanas came with gold and returned with pepper, and Muziris resounded with the noise.'[5] Thus it is no accident that the largest number of Roman gold hoards have been found in the hinterland of Muziris. In the area around Coimbatore, through which the trade route from the Malabar coast led into the interior of southern India and on to the east coast, eleven rich hoards of gold and silver Roman coins of the first century AD were found. Perhaps they were the savings of pepper planters and merchants or the loot of highwaymen who may have made this important trade route their special target.