CHAPTER 4

# New Beginnings: Cities and States

*The kingdom shall be protected by fortifying the capital and the towns at the frontiers. The land should not only be capable of sustaining the population but also outsiders in times of calamities. ... It should be beautiful, being endowed with cultivable land, mines, timber forests, elephant forests, and good pastures rich in cattle. It should not depend [only on] rain for water. It should have good roads and waterways. It should have a productive economy, with a wide variety of commodities ....*

*– Kauṭilya, Arthaśhāstra*

*Fig. 4.1. Ruins of a major structure at Rājagṛiha (modern-day Rajgir in Bihar), when it was the capital of the Magadha mahājanapada.*

## The Big Questions

1. *What is meant by 'Second Urbanisation of India'?*
2. *Why were the janapadas and mahājanapadas an important development in India's early history?*
3. *What kind of system of governance did they evolve?*

Let us recall that in the early 2nd millennium BCE (that is, over a few centuries after 2000 BCE), the Indus/Harappan/Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation, which we called India's 'First Urbanisation', disintegrated. Some of its cities were abandoned; in others, some people continued living there, but reverting to a rural or village lifestyle. They had to, since all the components of the Harappan urban order had disappeared: elaborate structures, both private and public; crowded streets and busy markets; different communities with specialised occupations (metalsmiths, potters, builders, weavers, craftspeople, and so on); a writing system; a sanitation system; the presence of an administration; and, behind it all, a larger state structure with a ruling class at the head. And for a whole millennium, urban life remained absent from India, though there may have been a few towns here and there in north India.

*Fig. 4.2. The fertile Gangetic plains helped the mahājanapadas to grow and prosper.*

Indeed, there were important regional cultures, which we need not study here.

Then, in the 1st millennium BCE, a vibrant new phase of urbanisation began in the Ganga plains, parts of the Indus (or Sindhu) basin and neighbouring regions, gradually spreading to other parts of the Subcontinent. How do we know this? Mainly from two sources: (1) archaeological excavations that have confirmed the existence of those ancient urban centres, and (2) ancient literature describing them—late Vedic, Buddhist and Jain literatures are full of references to these new urban centres.

This new phase is often called India's 'Second Urbanisation'—which, incidentally, has continued right up to today! Let us see how this phase emerged.

## *Janapadas* and *Mahājanapadas*

Towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, regional cultures gradually reorganised themselves in north India. As people formed clans or groups, probably sharing a common language and common customs, each clan came to be associated with a territory or *janapada* led by a *rājā* or ruler. ('*Janapada*' is a Sanskrit word which means 'where the people (*jana*) have set foot (*pada*),' that is, have settled down.)

The *janapadas* grew as trade networks expanded and connected them. By the 8th or 7th centuries BCE, some of those early states had merged together; the resulting bigger units were known as *mahājanapadas*. Although the texts have different lists of them, the more frequent list gives the names of 16 *mahājanapadas*, extending from Gandhāra in the northwest to Anga in the east and to Aśhmaka in central India, close to the Godavari River (see map). There may have been a few more, along with some smaller *janapadas* continuing independently.

## THINK ABOUT IT

Notice how many of the *mahājanapadas* are concentrated in the Ganga plains. There are several possible reasons for this, including the growth of agriculture in the fertile Ganga plains, the availability of iron ore in the mountains and hills (see below about iron), and the formation of new trade networks.

## LET'S EXPLORE

- → The most powerful of these new states were Magadha, Kosala, Vatsa and Avanti. Looking at the map, can you identify their capitals? Also, how many can you match with Indian cities of today?
- → Compare this map with the map of the regions mentioned in the Mahābhārata (see Fig. 5.4 in the chapter 'India, That Is Bharat' in Grade 6) and list the names common to both maps. What do you think this implies?

**Moat:** A deep, wide ditch surrounding a fort or a fortified city and filled with water.

The map (Fig. 4.3) shows the *mahājanapadas*' capitals. Most were fairly large well-fortified cities, with a **moat** running outside the fortifications as further defence. Often, the gateways through the rampart walls would be deliberately kept narrow, so guards may control the movement of people and goods entering or leaving the city. It is fascinating to note that most of those ancient capitals continue to be living cities today—'modern' cities that are often 2,500 years old!

## Early Democratic Traditions

Each *janapada* had an assembly or council, called *sabhā* or *samiti*, where matters concerning the clan would be discussed. (Remember, from the chapter on 'India's Cultural Roots', that the words *sabhā* and *samiti* first appear in the Vedas, India's most ancient texts.) We may assume that most of the members were elders in the clan. The *rājā* was not expected to rule independently or arbitrarily;

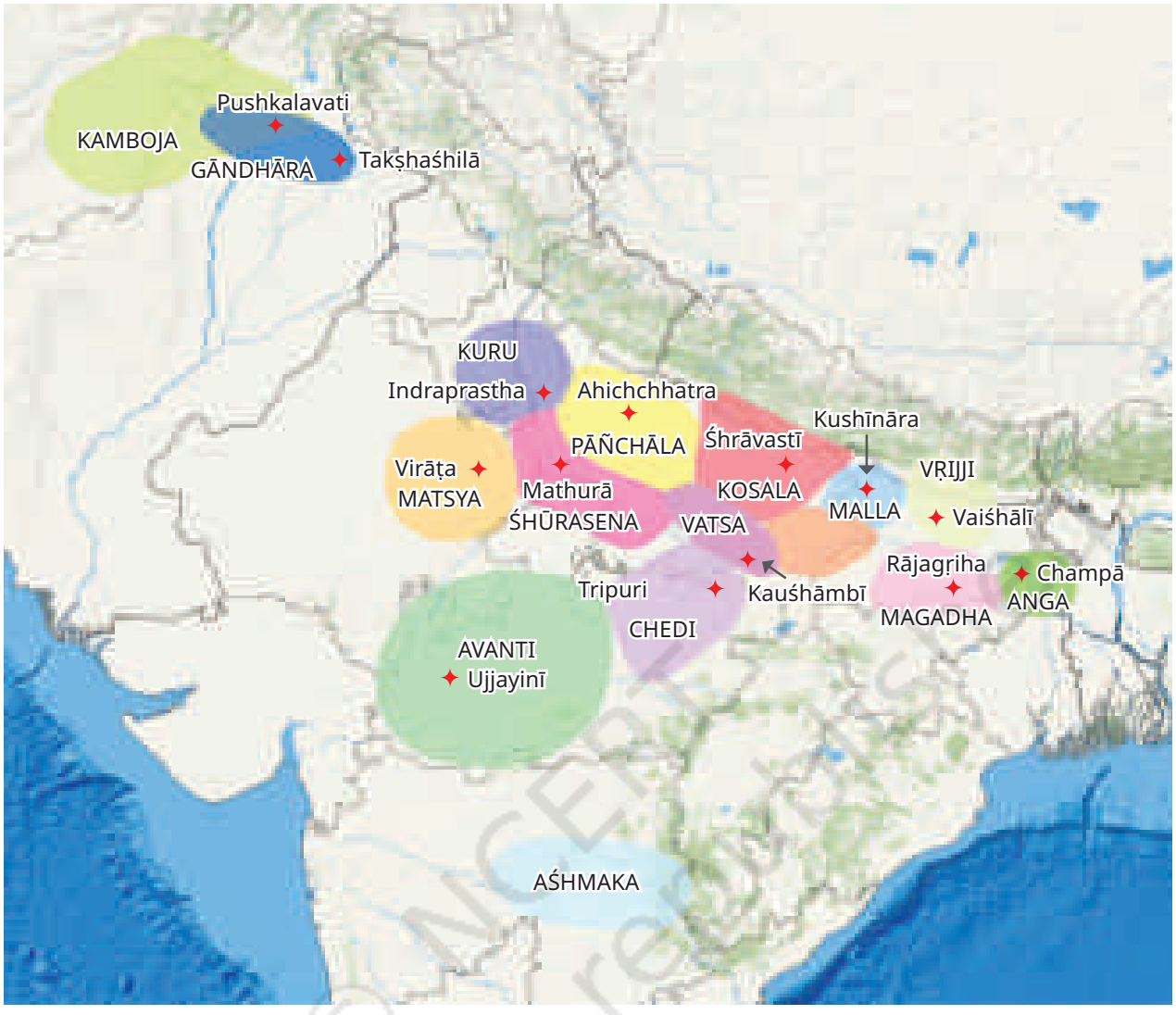



*Fig. 4.3. Map of the sixteen mahājanapadas. Note that their borders are approximate.*

a good ruler was supposed to take the advice from those assemblies, apart from the ministers and administrators. Indeed, according to some texts, an incompetent ruler could be removed by the assembly. Of course, while such mentions are significant, it does not mean that this was an established law; let us remember that the data we have for such remote periods is incomplete.

In their political systems, the *mahājanapadas* expanded the basic principles of the *janapadas*. Some were, in effect, monarchies, in the sense that the *rājā* was the ultimate authority, supported by ministers and an assembly of

elders. His position was hereditary, in the sense that a *rājā* would usually be the son of the previous one. The king would collect taxes or revenue, maintain law and order, get impressive fortifications built around their capital, and maintain an army to defend the territory or wage war with neighbouring ones, as the case may be. Magadha (located in part of today's Bihar), Kosala (in part of today's Uttar Pradesh) and Avanti (in part of today's Madhya Pradesh) were among the most powerful such states.

However, at least two *mahājanapadas*, Vajji (or Vṛijji) and the neighbouring Malla, had a different system: the *sabhā* or *samiti* had more power and took important decisions through discussion, and, if necessary, through vote. Surprisingly, this included the selection of the *rājā*! This means that those *mahājanapadas*, which were called *gaṇas* or *sanghas*, were not monarchies—their functioning might be called democratic, since members of the assembly were the ones to select the ruler and take major decisions. In fact,

*Fig. 4.4. Ruins of a complex at Kauśhāmbī, capital of the Vatsa mahājanapada*

scholars have often called them 'early republics', as they are indeed one of the earliest such systems in the world.

## More Innovations

The age of the *janapada*s and *mahājanapadas* was an age of profound change, which would impact Indian civilisation until present times. In the chapter 'India's Cultural Roots' in Grade 6, we saw the emergence of several new schools of thought—late Vedic, Buddhist, Jain in particular, and their respective literatures. Those schools disseminated their teachings and literature through scholars, monks and nuns travelling across India or people undertaking pilgrimages. Indian art also underwent a renewal; it will blossom in the age of empires.

Urbanisation does not happen without technologies. Let us remember that the Harappan civilisation mastered copper and bronze metallurgy. Now, in this Second Urbanisation, a major shift in technology involved iron metallurgy. In several regions of India, the techniques of extracting and shaping iron were actually perfected from the early 2nd millennium BCE, but it took a few centuries for iron to become a part of daily life. By the late 2nd millennium BCE, iron tools had become widespread, facilitating agriculture on a bigger scale. Iron also made better weapons than bronze, lighter and sharper—swords, spears, arrows, shields, etc. As it happens, there is some evidence of warfare between neighbouring *mahājanapadas*—how frequent or how intense it was, of course, is impossible to tell. Such military campaigns, but occasionally alliances too, gave rise to new kingdoms and empires, which we will turn to later in our journey.

Another innovation was the first use of coins in India, made necessary by growing trade. Very soon, coins were exchanged across different regions and even with other parts of the world. The first Indian coins were made of

silver, a soft metal into which symbols could be 'punched'; they are called 'punch-marked coins'. Later, coins of copper, gold and other metals were also made. Generally, a *mahājanapada* issued its own coins, but coins from neighbouring regions were used as well as exchanged in trade.

## LET'S EXPLORE

Fill up the following table with a Yes (or tick mark) or No (or cross mark) in each square, which provides an interesting comparison between these two phases of Indian civilisation.

| | First Urbanisation | Second Urbanisation |
|---|---|---|
| Ganga plains | | |
| Monasteries | | |
| Literature | | |
| Trade | | |
| Warfare | | |
| Copper/bronze | | |
| Iron | | |

## The *Varṇa–Jāti* System

We saw earlier how human societies grew more complex with the rise of civilisation. Whenever this happens, a society organises itself in several groups based on class, occupation or some other criteria. For instance, there could be different groups concerned with governance, administration, religion, education, trade, town-planning, farming, crafts, arts and all kinds of other professions.

*Fig. 4.5. A panel of the Sanchi stūpa depicting a smithy (or metal workshop), where different workers bring firewood, water, stoke the fire, beat the iron, etc.*

*Fig. 4.6. A few punch-marked coins from various ancient cities of north India.*

## LET'S EXPLORE

→ Why should a complex society divide itself into such groups? Think about several possible factors why this happens.

→ List other such professions you expect in a complex society of the 1st millennium BCE.

In an ideal society, all those groups would complement each other and work in harmony. But most of the time, these divisions also lead to inequalities: some groups acquire more wealth, power or influence than others. In other words, while equality is an ideal that human societies have often aspired to, very few, if any, have ever achieved it.

In India, the society was organised in a two-fold system. One category was the *jāti*, a group or community of people with a specific professional occupation closely tied to their livelihood. The skills that defined a particular *jāti*—for instance, skill in agriculture, metallurgy, commerce or any craft — was generally transmitted from generation to generation. Often, a *jāti* would get further subdivided into sub-*jāti*s, each of which developed customs and traditions of its own, for instance concerning marriage, rituals or food habits.

Along with the *jāti*, there is another category, that of *varṇa*, a concept that emerged from Vedic texts. There were four *varṇa*s: Brahmins were engaged in preserving and spreading knowledge, and in the performance of rituals; Kshatriyas were expected to defend the society and the land, and to engage in warfare if necessary; Vaishyas were supposed to increase the society's wealth through occupations of trade, business or agriculture; finally, Shudras were the artisans, craftspeople, workers or servants.

## DON'T MISS OUT

You may have heard the English word 'caste'. It comes from a Portuguese word, *casta*, as Portuguese travellers to India in the 16th century CE tried to make sense of Indian society. While a few scholars consider 'caste' to refer to *varṇa*s, most take it to apply to *jātis*; yet others consider 'caste' to refer to the whole *varṇa–jāti* system.

There is historical evidence, both in texts and inscriptions, that in the early period individuals and communities changed their professional occupations if circumstances demanded. For instance, a long drought or some natural calamity could force a community of farmers to migrate to a city and take up other occupations, or some Brahmins would turn to trade or even military activities. This complex system structured Indian society, organised its activities, including economic ones, and therefore gave it some stability. In time, however, the system became rigid and led to inequalities and discrimination towards the lower *jātis* or some communities excluded from the *varṇa-jāti* system. This process will be studied in a higher grade.

The *varṇa-jāti* system has had a deep impact on Indian society, and generations of scholars have studied its countless aspects. There is a broad agreement that the system was significantly different (more flexible, in particular) in earlier periods and became more rigid with the passage of time, in particular during the British rule in India. Let us also keep in mind that while *varṇa-jāti* has been an important mechanism at work in Indian society, it is not the only one; there have been many others, some of which we will explore later, especially in the theme 'Our Cultural Heritage and Knowledge Traditions'.

## THINK ABOUT IT

Inequalities within society can exist in many forms. Have you encountered any incident where you or anyone you know might have been made to feel different from others? Do you think equality is desirable in a society? If so, why? Have you come across people or initiatives that lessened inequalities?

## Developments Elsewhere in India

In this 1st millennium BCE, important communication routes opened up for purposes of trade, pilgrimage, military campaigns, etc. Two routes became widely used and are often mentioned in the literature: the Uttarapatha and the Dakṣhiṇapatha. The first connected the northwest regions to the Ganga plains, all the way to eastern India; the second started from Kauśhāmbī (near Prayagraj), then a capital of

*Fig. 4.7. Śhiśhupalgarh (today a suburb of Bhubaneswar, first excavated in 1948): one of the gateways into the city, through the fortifications; the moat, full of water, is visible outside the gateway. Notice the narrowing in the gateway, for control of movement of people and goods.*

one of the *mahājanapadas*, and crossed the Vindhya Range of hills to proceed all the way south. We will return to these routes when we explore the formation of empires in India.

Many lateral roads also connected with other parts of India, especially the important ports on the western and eastern coasts, which were vibrant centres of trade. In the eastern region, major cities emerged, such as Śhiśhupalgarh (today Sisupalgarh, part of Bhubaneswar), which was the capital of the Kalinga region and followed a strict square ground plan, with imposing fortifications and broad streets.

In the Subcontinent's southern regions, cities began emerging from about 400 BCE, although recent excavations claim to find some signs of commercial activities going further back. Around this time, three kingdoms emerged—the Cholas, the Cheras and the Pāṇḍyas.

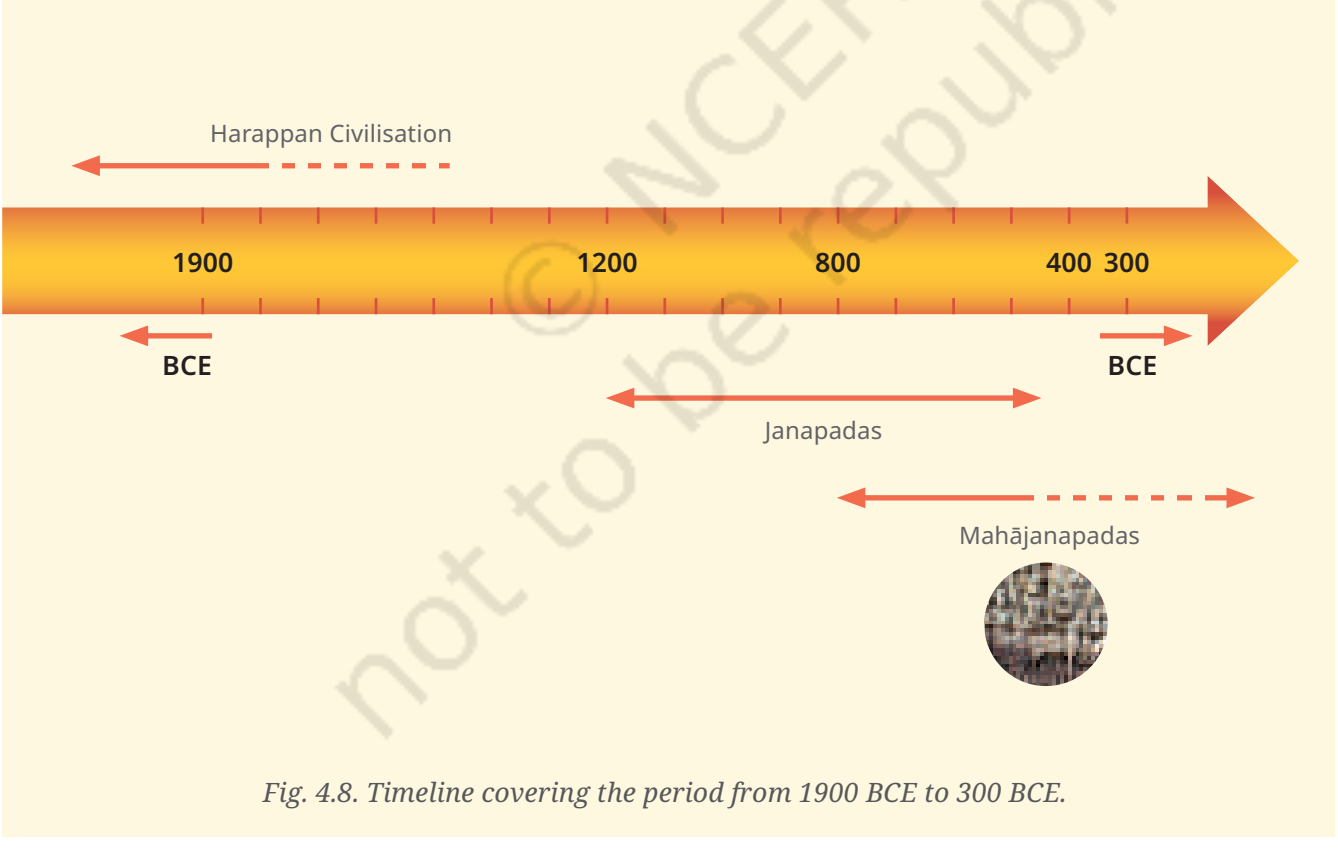



*Fig. 4.8. Timeline covering the period from 1900 BCE to 300 BCE.*

*Fig. 4.9. Shell and gemstones industries at the site of Kodumanal (near Erode, Tamil Nadu)*

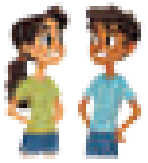
Apart from archaeological evidence, the most ancient Tamil literature mentions those kingdoms and several of their kings.

Because the southern regions are rich in resources such as precious and semiprecious stones, gold, and spices, they profitably traded not only with the rest of India but also with kingdoms and empires overseas.

By 300 or 200 BCE, almost the entire Subcontinent, including regions in the Northeast, was one vibrant interconnected land; goods and culture travelled from region to region, and often beyond India to parts of Central and Southeast Asia.

About the same time, the *mahājanapadas* ceased to exist, leaving the place to fresh developments that were going to reshape India.

## Before we move on ...



- From the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, *janapadas* rose in parts of north and central India; they were smaller states with a *rājā* at the head taking counsel from an assembly of elders.
- The 16 *mahājanapadas* were the first organised states of the 1st millennium BCE; they witnessed the Second Urbanisation of India, which spread in all directions from the Ganga region, all the way to south India. By 300 BCE or so, the *mahājanapadas* ceased to exist.
- In the same period, a vast network of roads connected north and south, east and west, and eventually all regions of the Subcontinent. People, goods, ideas and teachings travelled along all those roads.

## Questions and activities

1. Consider the quotation at the start of the chapter and discuss in several groups. Compare your observations and conclusions on what Kauṭilya recommends for a kingdom. Is it very different today?
2. According to the text, how were rulers chosen in early Vedic society?
3. Imagine you are a historian studying ancient India. What types of sources (archaeological, literary, etc.) would you use to learn more about the *mahājanapadas*? Explain how each source might contribute to your understanding.
4. Why was the development of iron metallurgy so important for the growth of urbanism in the 1st millennium BCE? You may use points from the chapter but also from your knowledge or imagination.

# Noodles



*‘Noodles’ is our abbreviation for ‘Notes and Doodles’!