

# APPOLO STUDY CENTRE

## KUSHANA

### 6<sup>th</sup> term - I

## Unit - 3 The Age of Empires: Guptas and Vardhanas

### Introduction

- By the end of the 3rd century, the powerful empires established by the Kushanas in the north and Satavahanas in the south had lost their greatness and strength. After the decline of Kushanas and Satavahanas, Chandragupta carved out a kingdom and establish his dynastic rule, which lasted for about two hundred years. After the downfall of the Guptas and thereafter and interregnum of nearly 50 years, Harsha of Vardhana dynasty ruled North India from 606 to 647 A.D (CE).

### Sources

- ❖ Archaeological Sources
- ❖ Gold, silver and copper coins issued by Gupta rulers.
- ❖ Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta.
- ❖ The Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription.
- ❖ Udayagiri Cave Inscription, Mathura Stone Inscription and Sanchi Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II.
- ❖ Bhitari Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta.
- ❖ The Gadhwa Stone Inscription.
- ❖ Madubhan Copper Plate Inscription
- ❖ Sonpat Copper Plate
- ❖ Nalanda Inscription on clay seal

### Literary Sources

- ❖ Vishnu, Matsya, Vayu and Bhagavata Puranas and Niti Sastras of Narada
- ❖ Visakhadatta's Devichandraguptam and Mudrarakshasa and Bana's Harshacharita
- ❖ Dramas of Kalidasa
- ❖ Accounts of Chinese Buddhist monk Fahien who visited India during the reign of Chandragupta II.
- ❖ Harsha's Ratnavali, Nagananda, Priyadharshika
- ❖ Hiuen-Tsang's Si-Yu-Ki

### **Foundation of the Gupta Dynasty**

- Sri Gupta is considered to be the founder of the Gupta dynasty. He is believed to have reigned over parts of present-day Bengal and Bihar. He was the first Gupta ruler to be featured on coins. He was succeeded by his son Ghatotkacha. Both are mentioned as Maharajas in inscriptions.

### **Chandragupta I (c. 319–335 AD(CE))**

- Chandragupta I married Kumaradevi of the famous and powerful Lichchhavi family. Having gained the support of this family, Chandragupta could eliminate various small states in northern India and crown himself the monarch of a larger kingdom. The gold coins attributed to Chandragupta bear the images of Chandragupta, Kumaradevi and the legend 'Lichchhavayah'.

### **Samudragupta (c. 335–380)**

- Samudragupta, son of Chandragupta I, was the greatest ruler of the dynasty. The Prayag Prashasti, composed by Samudragupta's court poet Harisena was engraved on Allahabad Pillar. This Allahabad Pillar inscription is the main source of information for Samudragupta's reign.

### **Consolidation of Gupta Dynasty**

- Samudragupta was a great general and when he became emperor, he carried on a vigorous campaign all over the country and even in the south. In the southern Pallava kingdom, the king who was defeated by Samudragupta was Vishnugopa.

- Samudragupta conquered nine kingdoms in northern India. He reduced 12 rulers of the southern India to the status of feudatories and forced them to pay tribute. He received homage from the rulers of East Bengal, Assam, Nepal, the eastern part of Punjab and various tribes of Rajasthan.

### **Chandragupta II (C.380 - 415)**

- Chandragupta II was the son of Samudragupta. He was also known as Vikramaditya. He conquered western Malwa and Gujarat by defeating the Saka rulers. He maintained friendly relationship with the rulers of southern India. The iron pillar near Qutub Minar is believed to have been built by Vikramaditya. Fahien, a Buddhist scholar from China, visited India during his reign. Vikramaditya is said to have assembled the greatest writers and artists (Navaratna [Nine Jewels]) in his court. Kalidasa is said to be one among them. Chandragupta II was succeeded by his son Kumaragupta I, who built the famous Nalanda University.
- Kumaragupta's successor Skandagupta had to face a new threat in the form of the invasion of Huns. He defeated them and drove them away. But after twelve years, they came again and broke the back of the Gupta Empire. The last of the great Guptas was Baladitya, assumed to have been Narasimha Gupta I.

### **Fahien**

- During the reign of Chandragupta II, the Buddhist monk Fahien visited India. His travel accounts provided us information about the socio-economic, religious and moral conditions of the people of the Gupta age. According to Fahien, the people of Magadha were happy and prosperous, that justice was mildly administered and there was no death penalty. Gaya was desolated. Kapilavasthu had become a jungle, but at Pataliputra people were rich and prosperous.
- He was himself attracted towards Buddhism. He was paying tribute to Mihirakula but was distressed by his hostility towards Buddhism. So he stopped paying tribute. Though Baladitya succeeded in imprisoning him, Mihirakula turned treacherous and drove away Baladitya from Magadha. After Baladitya, the great Gupta Empire

faded away. The last recognised king of the Gupta Empire was Vishnugupta.

### **Gupta Polity**

- The divine theory of kingship (the concept that king is the representative of God on earth and so he is answerable only to God and not to anyone else) was practised by the Gupta rulers. The Gupta kings wielded enormous power in political, administrative, military and judicial spheres. The Gupta king was assisted by a council of mantris (ministers). The council consisted of princes, high officials and feudatories. A large number of officials were employed by the Gupta rulers to carry on the day-to-day administration of the country. High-ranking officials were called dandanayakas and mahadandanayakas.
- The Gupta Empire was divided into provinces known as deshas or bhuktis. They were administered by the governors, designated as uparikas. The province was divided into districts such as vishyas and they were controlled by the officers known as vishyapatis. At the village level, there were functionaries such as gramika and gramadhyaksha. The extensive empire shows the important role of military organisation. Seals and inscriptions mentioned military designations as baladhikrita and mahabaladhikrita (commander of infantry and cavalry respectively). The system of espionage included spies known as dutakas.

### **Society and Economy**

#### **Land and Peasants**

- Nitisara, authored by Kamandaka, emphasises the importance of the royal treasury and mentions various sources of revenue. The military campaigns of kings like Samudragupta were financed through revenue surpluses. Land tax was the main revenue to the government. The condition of peasants was pathetic. They were required to pay various taxes. They were reduced to the position of serfs.

<b>Classification of land during Gupta period</b>	
Kshetra	Cultivable land
Khila	Waste land
Aprahata	Jungle or forest land
Vasti	Habitable land
Gapata Saraha	Pastoral land

### Trade and Commerce

- The contribution of the traders for the development of Gupta's economy was very impressive. There were two types of traders, namely Sresti and Sarthavaha.

<b>Sresti</b>	<b>Sarthavaha</b>
Sresti traders usually settled at a standard place	Sarthavaha traders were caravan traders who carried their goods to different places.

- Trade items ranged from daily products to valuable and luxury goods. The important trade goods were pepper, gold, copper, iron, horses and elephants. Lending money at a high rate of interest was in practice during Gupta period. The Guptas developed roadways connecting different parts of the country. Pataliputra, Ujjain, Benaras, Mathura were the famous trade centres. Ports in western (Kalyan, Mangalore, Malabar) and eastern (Tamralipti in Bengal) coasts of India facilitated trade.

### **Nalanda University**

- Nalanda University flourished under the patronage of the gupta Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries and later under emperor Harsha of Kanauj.
- At Nalanda, Buddhism was the main subject of study. Other subjects like Yoga, Vedic literature and Medicine were also taught.
- Hiuen Tsang spent many years studying Buddhism in the University.
- Eight Mahapatashalas and three large libraries were situated on the campus.
- Nalanda was ravaged and destroyed by Mamluks (Turkish

Muslims) Under Bhaktiyar Khalji.

- Today, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### Metallurgy

- Mining and metallurgy were the most flourishing industries during the Gupta period.
- The most important evidence of development in metallurgy was the Mehrauli Iron Pillar installed by King Chandragupta in Delhi. This monolithic iron pillar has lasted through the centuries without rusting.

### Society

- The society that adhered to four varna system was patriarchal. According to laws of Manu, which was in force, women should be under the protection of their father, husband or eldest son. Polygamy was widely prevalent. The kings and feudatory lords often had more than one wife. Inscriptions refer to Kubernaga and Dhrubaswamini as the queens of Chandragupta II. Sati was practised during the Gupta rule.

### Slavery

- Slavery was not institutionalised in India, as in the West. But there are references to the existence of various categories of slaves during the Gupta age.

### Religion

- There was revival of Vedic religion and Vedic rites. Samudragupta and Kumaragupta I performed Asvamedha Yagna (a horse sacrifice ritual). We notice the beginning of image worship and the emergence of two sects, namely Vaishnavism and Saivism, during the Gupta period. Buddhism also continued to flourish though it split into two sects, namely Hinayana and Mahayana.

### Art and Architecture

- The Guptas were the first to construct temples, which evolved from the earlier tradition of rock-cut shrines. Adorned with towers and elaborate carvings, these temples were dedicated to all Hindu deities. The most notable rock-cut caves are found at Ajanta and Ellora

(Maharashtra), Bagh (Madhya Pradesh) and Udaygiri (Odisha). The structural temples built during this period resemble the characteristic features of the Dravidian style.

- Two remarkable examples of Gupta metal sculpture are (i) a copper image of Buddha about 18 feet high at Nalanda and (ii) Sultanganj Buddha seven-and-a-half feet in height. The most important examples of the Gupta paintings are found on the Fresco of the Ajanta caves and the Bagh cave in Gwalior.

### **Literature**

- Though the language spoken by the people was Prakrit, the Guptas made Sanskrit the official language and all their epigraphic records are in Sanskrit. The Gupta period also saw the development of Sanskrit grammar based on the grammar of Panini and Patanjali who wrote Ashtadhyayi and Mahabhashya respectively. A Buddhist scholar from Bengal, Chandrogomia, composed a book on grammar titled Chandravyakaranam. Kalidasa's famous dramas were Sakunthala, Malavikagnimitra and Vikramaoorvashiyam. Other significant works of Kalidasa were Meghaduta, Raghuvamsa, Kumarasambava and Ritusamhara.

### **Mathematics, Astronomy and Medicine**

- Invention of zero and the consequent evolution of the decimal system were the legacy of Guptas to the modern world. Aryabhatta, Varahamihira and Brahmagupta were foremost astronomers and mathematicians of the time. Aryabhatta, in his book Surya Siddhanta, explained the true causes of solar and lunar eclipses. He was the first Indian astronomer to declare that the earth revolves around its own axis. Dhanvantri was a famous scholar in the field of medicine. He was a specialist in Ayurveda. Charaka was a medical scientist. Susruta was the first Indian to explain the process of surgery.

### **Vardhana Dynasty**

- The founder of the Vardhana or Pushyabhuti dynasty ruled from Thaneswar. Pushyabhuti served as a military general under the Guptas and rose to power after the fall of the Guptas. With the accession of Prabakaravardhana, the Pushyabhuti family became strong and powerful.

- Rajavardhana, the eldest son of Prabhakaravardhana, ascended the throne after his father's death. Rajavardhana's sister Rajayashri's husband, Raja of Kanauj, was killed by the Gauda ruler Sasanka of Bengal. Sasanka also imprisoned Rajayashri. Rajavardhana, in the process of retrieving his sister was treacherously killed by Sasanka. This resulted in his younger brother Harshavardhana becoming king of Thaneswar. The notables of the Kanauj kingdom also invited Harsha to take its crown. After becoming the ruler of the both Thaneswar and Kanauj, Harsha shifted his capital from Thaneswar to Kanauj.

### **Conquest of Harshavardhana**

- The most popular king of the vardhana dynasty was Harshavardhana. Harsha ruled for 41 years. His feudatories included those of Jalandhar, Kashmir, Nepal and Valabhi. Sasanka of Bengal remained hostile to him.
- It was Harsha who unified most of northern India. But the extension of his authority in the south was checked by Chalukya king Pulikesin II. The kingdom of Harsha disintegrated rapidly into small states after his death in 648 AD (CE). He maintained a cordial relationship with the rulers of Iran and China.

### **Administration**

- The emperor was assisted by a council of ministers. The prime minister occupied the most important position in the council of ministers. Bhaga, Hiranya and Bali were the three kinds of tax collected during Harsha's reign. Criminal law was more severe than that of the Gupta age. Life imprisonment was the punishment for violation of the laws and for plotting against the king. Perfect law and order prevailed throughout the empire. Harsha paid great attention to discipline and strength of the army. Harsha built charitable institutions for the stay of the travellers, and to care for the sick and the poor.

### **Religious Policy**

- Harsha was the worshipper of Shiva in the beginning, but he embraced Buddhism under the influence of his sister Rajyashri and the Buddhist monk and traveller Hiuen Tsang. He belonged to Mahayana school of thought. Harsha treated Vedic scholars and

Buddhist monks alike and distributed charities equally to them. He was the last Buddhist sovereign in India. As a pious Buddhist, Harsha stopped the killing of animals for food. He was noted for his policy of religious toleration and used to worship the images of Buddha, Shiva and Sun simultaneously. He summoned two Buddhist assemblies, one at Kanauj and another at Prayag.

### Art and Literature

- Harsha, himself a poet and dramatist, gathered around him a best of poets and artists. Harsha's popular works are Ratnavali, Nagananda and Priyadharshika. His royal court was adorned by Banabhatta, Mayura, Hardatta and Jayasena.
- Temples and monasteries functioned as centres of learning. Kanauj became a famous city. Harsha constructed a large number of viharas, monasteries and stupas on the bank of the Ganges. The Nalanda University, a university and monastery combined, was said to have had 10,000 students and monks in residence, when Hiuen Tsang visited the university.

### NOTE

- ❖ Lichchhavi was an old gana-sanga and its territory lay between the Ganges and the Nepal Terai.
- ❖ Prashasti is a Sanskrit word, meaning commendation or 'in praise of'. Court poets flattered their kings listing out their achievements. These accounts were later engraved on pillars so that the people could read them.
- ❖ Samudragupta was a devotee of Vishnu. He revived the Vedic practice of performing horse sacrifice to commemorate victories in wars. He issued gold coins and in one of them, he is portrayed playing harp (veenai). Samudragupta was not only a great conqueror but a lover of poetry and music and for this, he earned the title 'Kaviraja'.
- ❖ Srimeghavarman, the Buddhist king of Ceylon, was a contemporary of Samudragupta.
- ❖ The surnames of Chandragupta II were Vikramaditya, Narendrachandra, Simhachandra, Narendrasimha, Vikrama Devaraja, Devagupta and Devasri.
- ❖ Samudragupta introduced the Gupta monetary system. Kushana

coins provided inspiration to Samudragupta. The Gupta gold coins were known as Dinara. Guptas issued many gold coins but comparatively fewer silver and copper coins. However, the post-Gupta period saw a fall in the circulation of gold coins, indicating the decline in the prosperity of the empire.

- ❖ The metals used by them were: iron, gold, copper, tin, lead, brass, bronze, bell-metal, mica, manganese and red chalk.
- ❖ Harsha met the Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang, at Kajangala near Rajmahal (Jharkhand) for the first time.
- ❖ Hiuen Tsang, the 'prince of pilgrims', visited India during Harsha's reign. His Si- Yu-Ki provides detailed information about the social, economic, religious and cultural conditions of India during Harsha's time. Hiuen Tsang tells us how Harsha, though a Buddhist, went to participate in the great kumbhamela held at Prayag.
- ❖ The assembly at Kanauj was attended by 20 kings. A large number of Buddhist, Jain and Vedic scholars attended the assembly. A golden statue of Buddha was consecrated in a monastery and a small statue of Buddha (three feet) was carried in a procession.
- ❖ In the assembly at Prayag, Harsha distributed his wealth among the Buddhists, Vedic scholars and poor people. Harsha offered fabulous gifts to the Buddhist monks on all the four days of the assembly.
- ❖ Chandragupta I was the contemporary of Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor, who founded Constantinople.
- ❖ Harsha's time coincided with the early days of Tang Dynasty of China. Their capital (Xi'an) was a great centre of art and learning.

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# unit - 6 Polity and Society in Post - Mauryan Period

### Introduction

- In the four centuries following the death of Emperor Asoka and the resulting decline of the Mauryan Empire, parts of India were subject to the invasion of the Indo-Greeks, Sakas and Kushanas from West and Central Asia. All of them established themselves as rulers over large parts of India. This strengthened the process of acculturation and the assimilation of foreign cultures and art forms into Indian society. It also resulted in the integration of India with the Mediterranean world and Central Asia and China through extended trade linkages.

### Indo - Greek Realties

#### The Beginnings

- India's interaction with the Greeks began with the invasion of north-western India by Alexander (327-325 BCE) and his conquest of the Punjab region. When he began his return march to the West, he left the conquered territories under provincial governors. One of Chandragupta Maurya's early military expeditions was against these foreign intruders.
- Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander's most capable generals, succeeded in making himself the master of a vast territory from Phrygia (Turkey) to the river Indus after 311BCE. Within a few years, probably around 305 BCE, Chandragupta waged a war against Seleucus and defeated him. However, this was not the savage defeat that happened to Alexander's governors. Instead, Chandragupta made a peace treaty with Seleucus. Seleucus surrendered the land he had conquered up to the Indus and received 500 war elephants in return. There is also mention of a marriage agreement. The treaty also

led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Greeks and the Mauryan emperor. Megasthenes was sent to the Mauryan capital Pataliputra as the Greek ambassador.

- Bindusara, Chandragupta's son, continued to maintain friendly ties with the Greek kingdoms in West Asia. Greek historians refer to ambassadors sent by Ptolemy II of Egypt and to Bindusara's correspondence with Antiochus of Syria. Asoka also continued the tradition of friendly relations with the Greek kingdoms. His Rock Edict (13) mentions five yona kings, identified as Antiochus II Theos of Syria, Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of Corinth. This also indicates that the relations of Asoka with the Greeks extended beyond West Asia well into the heartland of Greece.
- We now come across the term yavana (or yona) for Greeks, which was used throughout India. The word was derived from the Persian word yauna, which referred to Greeks. In India the term yavana was used to denote all persons of Greek origin, including those of mixed race and even the Phoenicians.
- This regular interchange of ambassadors and correspondence, as well as the extension of the Mauryan Empire till Afghanistan, facilitated regular trade from India to the West as far as Egypt. Trade was carried on by the overland route via north-west Afghanistan (Bactria) and also partly by the coastal route along the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. A variety of luxury goods, including ivory, tortoise shell, pearls, indigo and other dyes, aromatic substances like spikenard or nard (a fragrant oil from the Gangetic region) and malabathrum (leaf of cinnamon, used as an aromatic) and rare woods were exported from India.
- The cultural influence of the Greeks is evident from the capitals of monuments at Pataliputra. Many historians argue that the elaborate administrative institutions of the Mauryan Empire drew inspiration from the administrative systems of the Persians and Greeks. The eventual rise of Indo-Greek kingdoms in western India strengthened these cross-cultural influences and gave rise to a distinct school of art.

## Indo-Greek kings

- The Seleucid Empire, which extended from northern Afghanistan (Bactria) to Syria, began to weaken and disintegrate after 250 BCE. The governor of Bactria, Diodotus, revolted against Antiochus II and became the independent ruler of Bactria. In 212 BCE, the king of Bactria was a Greek named Euthydemus. The Seleucid emperor Antiochus III was unable to subjugate Euthydemus and agreed to negotiate a settlement with him, since Antiochus himself needed to turn his attention to his dominions in the West. But Antiochus III did come down the Kabul river and managed to defeat the local Indian king, known as Subhagasena. Nothing much is known about this king. It can be inferred that the mention of an independent king in the region might be an indication of the weakening of the central authority of the Mauryan Empire after Asoka's death in 236 BCE.

## Demetrius

- Euthydemus's son Demetrius succeeded him (c. 200 BCE), and another Demetrius, probably Demetrius II, was the first known Indo-Greek king (c. 175 BCE). The distinguishing feature of the reign of the Indo-Greek kings was their exquisite coinage. Minted in the same style as Greek coins of silver, they carried the portrait of the reigning king on one side with his name. The coins thus give us a visual picture of the kings, who are represented in various kinds of headgear and with distinctive facial and physical features. Extensive collections of these coins have been found from the period, which makes it possible to reconstruct the lineage of the Indo-Greek kings with certainty.
- Indian accounts of the period refer to the yavana invasion of Ayodhya (Saketa) and further east into the Magadha territory. However, since the Greeks seem to have been beset by internal dissensions, they did not retain any of this territory. They ceded land to Pushyamitra, the Sunga emperor who had usurped the throne after the last Mauryan ruler. Numismatic evidence also proves Demetrius's association with India. He issued bi-lingual square coins with Greek on the obverse and Kharoshti (the local language of north-western Pakistan) on the reverse.

At about 165 BCE, Bactria was lost to the Parthians and Sakas. After this, the yavanas continued to rule in central and southern Afghanistan and north-western India. The Greeks continued to be beset with internal squabbles among many claimants to power, and the names of more than thirty kings can be identified from their coins. It is possible that they all ruled small pockets as autonomous rulers and issued their own coinage.

## Menander

- Menander (c.165/145–130 BCE) was the best known of the Indo-Greek kings. He is said to have ruled a large kingdom in the north-west of the country. His coins have been found over an extensive area ranging from the valleys of the Kabul and Indus rivers to as far as western Uttar Pradesh. This gives a good indication of the extent of his kingdom. Though he does not look like a great and heroic conqueror as seen in his coins, he is said to have raided the Gangetic region along with the kings of Panchala and Mathura. King Kharavela of Kalinga mentioned in the Hathigumpā inscription, was not able to stop him. Menander successfully attacked Pataliputra, but retreated without consolidating his conquest. Interestingly, in his coins, he is described as “king” and “soter” or saviour, and not as a great conqueror.
- Menander is mainly remembered as the eponymous hero of the Buddhist text, *Milinda-piṇḥa* (questions of Milinda), in which he is engaged in a question-and-answer discussion on Buddhism with the teacher Nagasena. He is believed to have become a Buddhist and promoted Buddhism.
- Another Indo-Greek king whose name is remembered is Antialcidas (or Antialkidas), c. 110. He is known to us primarily because his emissary, Heliodorus, who was sent to the court of King Bhagabhadra erected a pillar or garuda-dhvaja with its capital adorned by a figure of Garuda, in honour of God Krishna (Vasudeva). Heliodorus had evidently become a follower of Vishnu. (The pillar stands in isolation in the middle of an open ground in Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh.)

- Indian interactions with the Greeks was not limited to the Indo-Greek kings. Greeks were becoming known and their presence recorded throughout the sub-continent. Merchants, sailors and many others of Greek origin were travelling to India, so there was a continued interaction with the Greeks.

### **Sakas, Parthians and Kushanas**

- The Indo-Greek kingdoms in north-western India were ousted by various nomadic tribes from Central Asia, known as the Sakas (Scythians), Parthians (Pahlavis) and Kushanas (yueh-chi or yuezhi tribes in Chinese). In spite of the fact that they followed the Greek practice of issuing vast amounts of coinage with their names and titles (mostly “king of kings”), this is a very confusing period in our history. It is a daunting task to try and work out the lineage of various ruling clans and dynasties that came into India.
- The first question that arises is: why and how did nomadic tribes turn to war and conquest? The advent of these tribes in India arose as a result of a complex sequence of migrations and political developments in Central Asia. In the eastern part of Central Asia, the Yueh-chi were being pushed westward by the Chinese who had built the Great Wall to keep out nomads and to protect their villages and agriculture from their raids. The Yueh-chi, in turn, turned westward and pushed the Sakas towards eastern Iran, where the Parthians had become rulers following the collapse of the Seleucid empire. As a curious historical event, in 58 BCE, the independent Parthian kingdom of eastern Iran was established by the Parthian Vonones (or Azes, according to some historians). This year was taken to denote the start of the Vikram samvat era, the Indian calendar.

### **Sakas**

- The Sakas were pushed back from eastern Iran by the Parthian ruler Mithradates (188-123 BCE), and they then turned to north-western India and finally settled in the region between the Indus valley and Saurashtra. The first Saka ruler in India was Maues or Moga/Moga (20 BCE to 22 CE). He occupied Gandhara, driving a wedge into the Indo-Greek kingdoms, but it was his successor Azes who finally

destroyed the last remnants of the Indo-Greek kingdoms and extended Saka rule as far as Mathura.

- In India, the Sakas became assimilated into Hindu society. They began to adopt Hindu names and religious beliefs, so much so that their coins had representations of Hindu gods on one side. The Sakas appointed kshatrapas or satraps as provincial governors to administer their territories. Many of the kshatrapas titled themselves mahakshatrapas and were virtually independent rulers.
- One of the most famous of the Saka kshatrapas was Rudradaman (130-150 CE). His exploits are celebrated in the famous rock inscription of Junagadh (in Gujarat). According to this inscription, he had even defeated the Satavahanas in battle. His name indicates that the process of assimilation into Indian society was complete by that time.

### Kushanas

- The Sakas were displaced by the Parthian Gondophernes, who first conquered Kabul (c. 43 CE). He lost the Kabul valley to the Kushanas, but he was successful against the Sakas in India. Records of his rule have been discovered in Peshawar district. The Sakas approached the Kushanas (yueh-chi) for war help against the Parthians. The first Kushana king who conquered Afghanistan was Khujula Kadphises, followed by Wima Kadphises. The two kings extended Kushana territory to Gandhara, Punjab and as far to the east as the Ganga-Jumna doab till Mathura.

### Kanishka

- The best known of the Kushana kings was Kanishka, who is thought to have ruled from 78 CE till 101 or 102 CE. Ironically, 78 CE is held to be the beginning of the "Saka era" in the Indian calendar. Historians are, hence, divided about Kanishka's period. His rule is said to have started anywhere between 78 and 144 CE. Kanishka was an ardent follower of Buddhism and hosted the fourth Buddhist mahasangha or council (the third council had been held in Pataliputra during Asoka's reign). By now Mahayana Buddhism had become the dominant sect,

and Kanishka supported the missions sent to China to preach Buddhism.

- Kushana coins were of the highest quality and conformed to the weight standards of Roman coins. In the coins, Kushana rulers are referred to as “king of kings”, “Caesar”, “lord of all lands” and by other such titles. Unfortunately, the titles did not leave much room on the coins for the actual name of the ruler. Hence our information on the Kushana kings tends to be very uncertain. Kanishka’s coins as well as his statue found near Mathura show him dressed in a belted tunic along with overcoat and wearing boots, testifying to his Central Asian origins.
- The Karakoram highway, a joint project between China and Pakistan, which was completed in 1979, has yielded great dividends for archaeologists and historians. The rock of Hunza mentions the first two Kadphises and the Kusanadevapura (son of God) Maharaja Kaniska. This inscription confirms that Kanishka’s empire stretched from Central Asia till eastern India. Buddhist sources record that he had conquered Magadha and Kashmir and Khotan in Sinkiang.
- The artefacts found along the Karakoram highway also establish that this was the route taken by Buddhist monks travelling to China on their mission to spread Buddhism. Merchants followed the missionaries, so this became a major commercial route for the import of Chinese silk and horses from the West into India. Indian merchants established themselves in various towns in Central Asia and seized the opportunity to become intermediaries in the luxury trade between China and the Roman Empire, since merchants from the West did not want to venture further east beyond Central Asia.
- Kushana kings, mostly with their names ending with -shka (among them Huvishka and Vasishka as well as later Kanishkas and even Vasudeva), ruled for at least one century more, but nothing much is known about them. Clearly the empire was beginning to break down, and the satraps (the Kushanas also continued the practice of appointing satraps to govern the provinces) were able to set themselves up as independent rulers in various regional capitals.

## Art and Literature

- During the reign of Kushanas, there was great creative energy when art and literature flourished. This was partly due to royal patronage and partly due to other factors, like the growing ascendancy of Mahayana Buddhism, which allowed the representation of the person of Buddha in human form. The Greek influence led to an Indo-Greek style of sculpture and art commonly referred to as Gandhara art. Statues of Buddha, sculpted particularly in Taxila and the north-western regions, show him in graceful garments, surrounded by cherubs and leaves inspired by the Greek tradition. But mention must also be made of the red sandstone sculpture with intricate carving produced near Mathura.
- The Buddhists began to carve out rock caves in the hills of western India, which served as religious centres with chaityas and viharas, stretching from the Ajanta caves to the Kanheri caves in Mumbai. Large statues of Buddha were sculpted in these caves as a part of the Mahayana tradition, and in later centuries, they were further embellished with murals of extraordinary beauty, as seen in the Ajanta caves.
- Kanishka was the patron of Buddhist philosophers such as Asvaghosha, Parsva and Vasumitra, as well as the great Buddhist teacher Nagarjuna. Asvaghosha is known for his Buddhacharita and is celebrated as the author of the first Sanskrit play, Sariputraprakarana, in nine acts. The great dramatist Bhasa, whose plays were re-discovered only about a hundred years ago in South India, most probably belonged to this period. Among the Hindu treatises, we find the Manusmriti, Vatsyayana's Kamasutra and Kautilya's Arthashastra taking final shape by the second century CE.

### Gandhara Art

Situated in the cross-roads of cultural influences, Gandhara region was influenced by Greek and Roman culture. Gandhara school of art developed in the first century Common Era. During the time of Kushana Empire, in view of its contact with Rome, the techniques of Roman art were assimilated and applied in north-western India. The Gandhara art is famous for the portrayal of Buddha in a spiritual state, eyes half-

closed in meditation.

## The Tamil Kingdoms

- Southern India remained immune to the political changes taking place in the northern part of the country. Around the first century CE, the Satavahana kingdom was established in the Deccan area, comprising the modern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. This, however, was not like the centralised empire of the Mauryas, and the provincial governors of the Satavahanas had a considerable degree of autonomy.
- The political landscape of the Tamil region was fragmented into small kingdoms, in contrast to the north where extensive empires flourished. The Tamil region was ruled by *muvendar*, the three kings – the Pandyas from their capital Madurai, the Cholas from their capital Uraiyur (now a suburb of the city of Tiruchi), and the Cheras from Vanji (modern-day Karur). We know that these kings were known to the Mauryas even in the 3rd century BCE and Asoka's second rock edict mentions them as kingdoms bordering his empire. However, there were many war lords and chiefs (often referred to as *velir*) who were ruling over smaller principalities in the region.
- We have extensive information about the Tamil region coming from the corpus of Tamil poetry collectively known as the Sangam literature, dating from the third century BCE to the third century CE. To these we can add the epics *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*, which were written somewhat later. The very large volume of trade with the Tamil region evoked a great deal of interest among the Roman and Greek historians and geographers, and their accounts complement the information in the Tamil sources, especially with respect to trade. A first century CE account in Greek, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (*Periplus Maris Erythraei*), is the most reliable source of information on the ports of the Indian coast and trade. Archaeological findings confirm the information from all these sources.

## Contours of International Trade

- Two major developments changed the contours of trade between Europe and India towards the beginning of the Common Era. By the end of the last century BCE, Rome emerged as the superpower of the Mediterranean world, displacing the Greek kingdoms, and the republic became an empire in 27 BCE under Emperor Augustus. Rome was the largest and, probably, the wealthiest city in the world commanding huge resources realised through conquests in Europe and North Africa. The wealth of Rome greatly increased the demand for various products from India, especially the spices and textiles of the Tamil country, resulting in a great expansion of trade.
- The second development was the discovery of the pattern of monsoon winds in the Arabian Sea in the first century CE by Hippalus, an Egyptian sailor. Till then, the sea trade between India and the Mediterranean world was controlled by the Arabs. Arabs had a monopoly of the knowledge of the source regions of products such as cinnamon and pepper, which formed the main export to Rome. But when the information about the direct sea route became common knowledge, Roman ships began to sail directly to the western coast of India. They could thus avoid sailing close to the coastline, which made them vulnerable to attacks by pirates. Further, this also meant that the overland route could be circumvented completely, since traders on that route were also vulnerable to attacks by Parthians in Iran. The ultimate result of the combination of the growing demand from Rome and the opening of the direct sea route to western India was an increase in the number of ships sailing to India from about twenty ships a year to almost one ship a day.

## Trade Between tamizhagam and Rome

- Trade had flourished between the Tamil country and Rome even when Rome was a republic. Roman coins and artefacts of the period have been excavated at Arikamedu, near Pondicherry, which is said to have been an Indo-Roman trading station. Before the first century of the Common Era, Roman ships did not venture past the western coast of India around Cape Comorin. So the ports on the west coast were the main ports involved in trade with Rome. From the west

coast, the Roman traders travelled overland through the Palghat pass to production centres further east. Kodumanal and Padiyur in Erode and Vaniyampadi near Salem had mines producing beryl, which was a gemstone in high demand in Rome. In addition, Chennimalai near Erode produced iron and steel (remnants of furnaces and slag have been found here), which was also exported to Rome. This is the reason why the finds of Roman coins of the earlier period are concentrated in Coimbatore, Erode, Salem and Karur districts.

- By the end of the first century CE, however, Roman ships had begun to sail to ports on the Coromandel (east) coast of Tamil Nadu, and many of these ports are mentioned in the Periplus. On the west coast, the main ports were Naura (Cannanore) and Tyndys/Tondi (Ponnani), which were said to be on the northern border of the Tamil country of the Cheras. Musiri or Muziris was an important port located further south. Traditionally identified as Kodungallur, the recently undertaken Muziris excavation locates the port at Pattanam, a few kilometers away. Muziris was probably the busiest port on the coast. A recently discovered trade agreement written on papyrus between a merchant of Muziris and a merchant of Alexandria indicates the large consignments of cargo carried even by individual merchants. According to Sangam poetry, Musiri was the centre of two circuits of trade. Boats came in from the interior carrying rice and took back fish, which indicates a kind of barter trade in the primary consumption goods. At the same time, sacks of pepper were brought to the market and were exchanged for gold, which came in the ships, which in turn, was transported on barges to the shore.
- The ships sailing from India to Rome carried pepper, a large quantity of pearls, ivory, silk cloth, spikenard (a fragrant oil from the Gangetic region which was much in demand for personal use among wealthy Romans) malabathrum, the leaf of the cinnamon tree, again used as an aromatic, sapphire, beryl, diamonds and tortoiseshell. As Roman ships began to trade with the Coromandel coast, the fine cotton textiles of the region were also exported. From Rome, the main imports were coin, topaz, antimony, coral, crude glass, copper, tin and lead and wine. Clearly, the value of the exports from the Tamil region was much higher than the value of imports from Rome, and the volume of trade peaked in the second half of the first century CE,

during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. The growing trade imbalance, which had to be met through exports of coins or silver, became a source of concern. There was a complaint that each year the trade to India caused a drain of 55 million sesterces to Rome. Ultimately Emperor Vespasian passed laws to curb the luxury consumption of the wealthier classes in Rome, and imports from India subsequently comprised only cotton textiles and pepper, which were relatively low-value commodities.

- A further change in the trading pattern evolved because of the increased vulnerability of the traditional overland silk route. Silk cloth and yarn from China were carried by sea to the Coromandel ports, from where they were transhipped to Rome. Information about the trade relations of the Tamil region with the south-east and further east is very scanty. However, tortoiseshell (an important export to Rome) was sourced from islands near Malaya in the Indian Ocean, while silk came from China. There was also constant interaction with Java and Sri Lanka, which are mentioned in Tamil literature almost as extensions of Tamil Nadu, and Buddhism was probably the connecting link, which brought these countries together.

### **Foreign merchants (yavanas)**

- The expansion of overseas trade and shipping brought foreign merchants and sailors to the Tamil region. Because of the seasonal nature of the monsoon winds, and the prevailing levels of technology, long voyages necessitated long periods of stay in host countries. We find interesting insights into the response of Tamil society to the presence of these foreign merchants. Puhar was the most important port on the Coromandel coast. Here, yavana merchants lived in especially ear-marked residential quarters in the harbour area. Though they were allowed to trade freely, and were noted for their attractive goods, there was a good deal of reserve in the attitude of the local Tamils to foreign merchants who were considered an alien, barbaric people, who spoke a harsh-sounding language.
- Other yavanas also came with the merchants. The fortress of Madurai was guarded by yavanas carrying large swords. There are also references to yavana or metal workers and carpenters, who were

described as “hard-eyed” probably because they had grey or blue eyes. All these may not have been strictly of Greek origin, as implied by the term *yavana*, which had become a generic word to denote persons from the eastern Mediterranean regions.

### **Trade and the Economy: The Larger Picture**

- The magnitude of the expansion of trade that is evident in this period could have been achieved only through major changes to the production base of the economy. Even in the case of primary products like mined gemstones like beryl, increased demand would have involved more labour to work the mines, more implements and more capital. In the case of textiles, there would have been a considerable increase in weaving activity and in the subsidiary activities like spinning to produce the yarn for weaving, and perhaps even growing more cotton to increase the supply of the raw material. Growing trade thus would lead to a considerable degree of expansion of the economy.
- Merchants became more visible and important as trade grew. There were merchants dealing with specific products like food grains, cloth, gold and jewellery in the markets of the big cities. Merchants were also involved in overseas trade, as well as overland trade. Thus, the circuits of trade became more specialised with institutionalised arrangements to support the expanding commercial activities.
- One of the most important questions that arises is what was the extent to which money was used in commerce. This is difficult to answer. In all pre-modern economies, barter was an important medium of exchange. For instance, salt merchants of the Tamil region carried salt in their carts from the coastal areas of the east inland, travelling together in groups. It is more than probable that they exchanged their salt for other goods and necessities, rather than selling the salt for money. However, the extent of the overland and overseas trade, as well as the descriptions of the city markets in the literature would imply that money was the main medium of exchange.

- The Roman coins that have been found in various centres substantiate this inference. Locally, imitations of Roman coins were also minted, primarily to increase the supply of money in circulation. Fairly large volumes of Chera coins have also been found in the bed of the Amaravati river. The very large quantities of Indo-Greek and Kushana coins found in North India would lead to a similar conclusion about the level of monetisation. All this would lead to the inference that there was considerable use of money as the medium of exchange in the ancient period.

## Conclusion

- The centuries in discussion in this chapter were not a period of great political stability. With the exception of Kanishka, the invaders in North India did not consolidate their conquests by establishing large, stable empires. Even Kanishka ruled only for a relatively short period, and his empire slowly fell apart after his death. The Tamil region did not have the unifying force of a large empire and was fragmented into relatively small kingdoms and even smaller principalities. The most important development of this period both for the north and the south was the great expansion of trade. From the north, trade relations extended to China in the east and up to the known Mediterranean world in the west. For the south, in addition to internal trade and circuits of exchange, there was exponential growth in overseas trade to the west, and also to the east up to China. The result would be seen in a considerable degree of economic growth and increased prosperity, which is evident from the excavations of cities as well as the descriptions of urban centres in Tamil poetry.