



Chapter 5

The Rise of Empires

Class VII
Social Science



The Big Questions?

What is an empire?

How did empires rise and shape Indian civilisation?

What factors facilitated the transition from kingdoms to empires?

What was life like from the 6th to the 2nd century BCE?

What is an Empire?

- The word '**empire**' comes from Latin '*imperium*', meaning '**supreme power**'.
- An empire is a **collection of smaller kingdoms or territories**.
- A powerful **ruler or group of rulers controls** the entire empire.
- Control is often established **through warfare** or conquest.
- Smaller territories may keep their **own local rulers**, but they **pay tribute** to the emperor.
- The emperor **rules from a central capital**, often a major **economic and administrative center**.



Ancient Sanskrit texts used specific words to denote an **emperor**, highlighting their supreme status.



Samrāj – means *‘the lord of all’* or *‘supreme ruler’*.



Adhirāja – means *‘overlord’*.



Rājādhirāja – means *‘king of kings’*.

Empires in Indian History

Indian history is rich with **empires** that rose, expanded, ruled, declined, and disappeared.

The **last empire** on the Indian subcontinent existed **less than a century ago**.

The study begins with **ancient empires**, not modern ones.

Purpose: to understand how empires **functioned in the distant past**.

Empires had a **deep impact on India's evolution** —

- Political,
- Economic,
- Social, and
- Cultural.



Why should a king be so keen to expand his kingdom into an empire and become an emperor?

- An ambition to ‘rule the entire world’, a metaphor for controlling large territories and ensuring that they would be remembered for posterity;
- A wish to bring large areas under control and gain access to their resources to build economic and military strength;
- A desire for great wealth for himself and for the empire.



Features of an Empire

Challenges of Conducting Distant Military Campaigns

Armies are expensive to maintain.

Soldiers need food, gear, and pay.

War animals require care and supplies.

Roads and ships must be built or maintained.

Requires strong economy and resource access.

Needs large workforce and efficient organization.

Importance of Trade in Maintaining an Empire



Traded Goods in Ancient India

Textiles (especially cotton and silk)

Spices (like pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon)

Agricultural produce

Luxury items (gems, gold, ivory)

Handicrafts (metalwork, pottery, jewelry)

Animals (including elephants and horses)

An illustration depicting ancient maritime trade. Two large wooden sailing ships with white sails are shown on a blue sea, both heavily laden with stacks of brown cargo. In the foreground, a harbor scene shows several people in traditional attire. One person is walking with a large wooden barrel, while others are near a dock with more barrels. A red awning is visible on the left. The background shows a green shoreline.

Trade Reach

- Goods were traded both within India and to distant lands.
- Trade routes extended by **land (Silk Road)** and **sea (Indian Ocean trade)** to regions like Central Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and even the Roman Empire.



Some important trade routes from about 500 BCE onward and major cities marked on them. Notice the Uttarapatha and the Dakshinapatha routes.

Traders' Guilds in Ancient India

Not Individual Efforts: Traders often worked collectively, not alone.

Formation of Guilds (śreṇīs):

Associations of traders, craftsmen, moneylenders, or farmers.

Had an elected **head** and **executive officers** with ethical standards.

Significance of Guilds



Collaboration: Brought people together as allies rather than competitors.



Powerful Institutions: Held influence in economic, social, and sometimes political matters.



Guilds helped organize trade, maintain quality, and protect members' interests.



Guilds in Ancient India

- Traders formed **guilds (śreṇīs)** for cooperation and mutual benefit.
 - Shared **resources, market info, and workforce** to succeed together.
 - Guilds had the **right to make their own rules** without royal interference.
 - Included **traders, artisans, cultivators, moneylenders**, and others.
 - Helped ensure **strong trade, quality control, and economic stability**.
-

Legacy of Guilds in India

Guilds spread widely and lasted for centuries across India.

Their **influence continued** even after they ended formally.

Showed the **self-organising nature** of Indian society.

Similar to **village committees and councils** in structure and function.

Wise rulers allowed local institutions to function independently if they worked well.

The Rise of Magadha

Between the **6th and 4th century BCE**, north India experienced major changes.

Magadha (modern-day south Bihar and nearby areas) was one of the **sixteen mahājanapadas**.

Magadha **grew in power** and laid the foundation for India's **first empire**.

Early powerful kings like **Ajātaśhatru** helped establish Magadha as a **dominant political force**.



Factors Behind Magadha's Rise

- Surplus food grains enabled more people to engage in **arts and crafts**, increasing production.
 - The **Ganga and Son rivers** offered easy transportation routes for trade.
 - Thriving trade boosted the empire's **income and wealth**.
 - These economic strengths supported Magadha's **growth and dominance**.
-

Magadha's Geographic and Technological Advantages



Located in the **fertile Ganga plains** with rich resources like timber and elephants.



Nearby **hilly regions** provided **iron ore and minerals** essential for growth.



Use of **iron technology** boosted agriculture with iron ploughs, increasing food production.



Iron weapons made the army stronger and more effective.



These factors helped Magadha **expand and strengthen** as a kingdom.



An elaborate panel from the Sanchi Stūpa depicting soldiers riding elephants, horses, or on foot, waging battle and laying siege to Kusinārā (today Kushinagar), a city of north India, to recover relics of the Buddha (seen carried away on an elephant in the left part of the panel).

The Nanda Dynasty and Mahāpadma Nanda

Around the **5th century BCE**, **Mahāpadma Nanda** became a powerful ruler in Magadha.

He **founded the Nanda dynasty** and **unified smaller kingdoms**.

His empire extended over **eastern and northern India**.

A **thriving economy** led to the **minting of coins**, showing financial strength.

Greek accounts mention the Nandas had a **large, well-maintained army**.

The Fall of the Nanda Dynasty

The last Nanda ruler, **Dhana Nanda**, was known for his **wealth but unpopularity**.

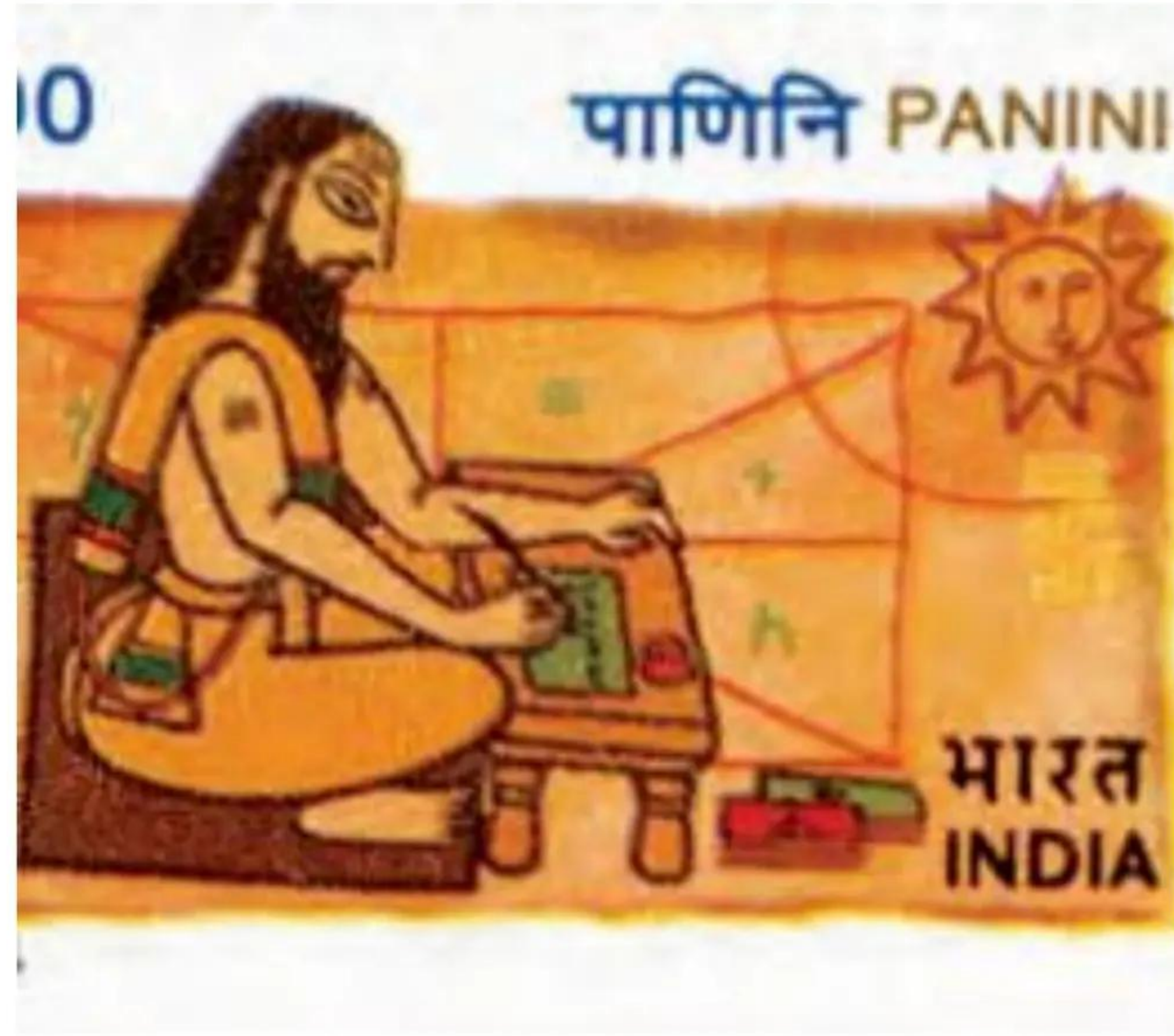
He became **oppressive and exploitative**, losing the support of the people.

This weakened the empire and made it vulnerable to conquest.

The **Nanda empire was eventually overthrown** and absorbed into the **Maurya Empire**, one of India's greatest empires.



A punch-marked silver coin of Mahāpadma Nanda



An India post stamp commemorating Pāṇini

- The famed Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini lived around the 5th century BCE, during the time of the Nandas.
- He is known for composing the Aṣṭādhyāyī, an ancient text that lists the rules of Sanskrit grammar in 3,996 short sūtras.

Satraps



The satraps were governors of provinces of Persian and Greek empires who were left behind by the overlord (like Alexander) to manage the far-off territories.



These satraps had significant power and freedom despite being mere officials of the rulers.

Northwestern India During Magadha's Rise

While Magadha grew in the east,
northwestern India had **smaller kingdoms**.

This region lay along an **ancient trade route**
connecting India to the **Mediterranean**.

One notable kingdom was that of the
Pauravas, ruled by **King Porus**, as mentioned
in **Greek accounts**.

The area was strategically important due to
its **location and trade connections**.



The Arrival of the Greeks



334-331
BCE:

Alexander, a young and powerful Greek king from Macedonia, campaigned against the Persian Empire to avenge earlier Persian invasions of Greece (during which some Indian soldiers from the Persian-ruled northwest of India fought against Greeks!). Alexander conquered the Persian Empire; the influence of Greek culture spread. His empire now spread over three continents, one of the largest in world history.

Fig. 5.10



Alexander



Back in Persia, Alexander faced rebellions and political turmoil. After he fell ill and died in Babylon at the age of 32, his immense empire was soon divided between his generals and the satraps, who created their own kingdoms.

**327-325
BCE**

Eager to reach the "end of the world", Alexander pushed on further east and brought his campaign to India, defeated Porus in Punjab and, encountering fierce resistance from local tribes and rulers, massacred the population of several cities. Greek records mention that in a few battles, "women fought side by side with their men." Alexander himself was seriously wounded in a battle. Tired and homesick, his soldiers lost the will to fight and refused to move deeper into India, towards the Ganga River. Alexander and part of his army retreated to Persia, but through the coastal route in the south and Iran's harsh desert regions, resulting in heavy losses to his troops out of thirst, hunger and disease.

**324-323
BCE**





A Greek coin probably showing Alexander on horseback attacking Porus on his elephant.

The Mighty Mauryas

After the decline of the **Nanda Empire**, a new power rose in **321 BCE**.

Chandragupta Maurya founded the **Maurya Empire**.

He quickly **absorbed Nanda territories** and expanded the empire.

He was guided by his mentor **Kauṭilya (Chanakya)**.

Kauṭilya used his expertise in **politics, governance, and economics**.

The Maurya Empire became one of the **greatest in Indian history**.

The story of Kauṭilya



Kauṭilya, also known as **Chanakya** or **Vishnugupta**, was a **renowned teacher** at **Takshashila University**.



According to **Buddhist texts**, he played a key role in shaping Indian political thought.

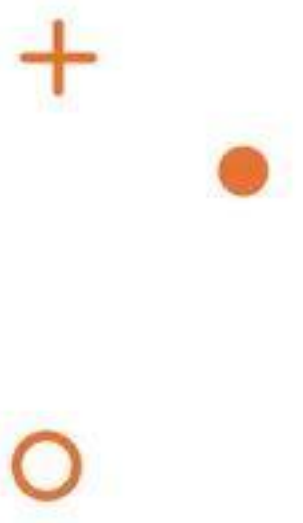


His story begins in the court of **Dhana Nanda**, the unpopular last ruler of the Nanda dynasty.



Discontent with Dhana Nanda's rule, **Kauṭilya vowed to overthrow him** and find a capable leader — **Chandragupta Maurya**.

Chandragupta Maurya and the Expansion of the Maurya Empire



Kautilya helped Chandragupta gradually expand the empire.

Chandragupta defeated Greek satraps left by Alexander in the northwest.

The empire stretched from the northern plains to the Deccan plateau.

Despite conflict, Chandragupta maintained diplomatic ties with the Greeks.

He hosted the Greek historian and diplomat Megasthenes at his court.

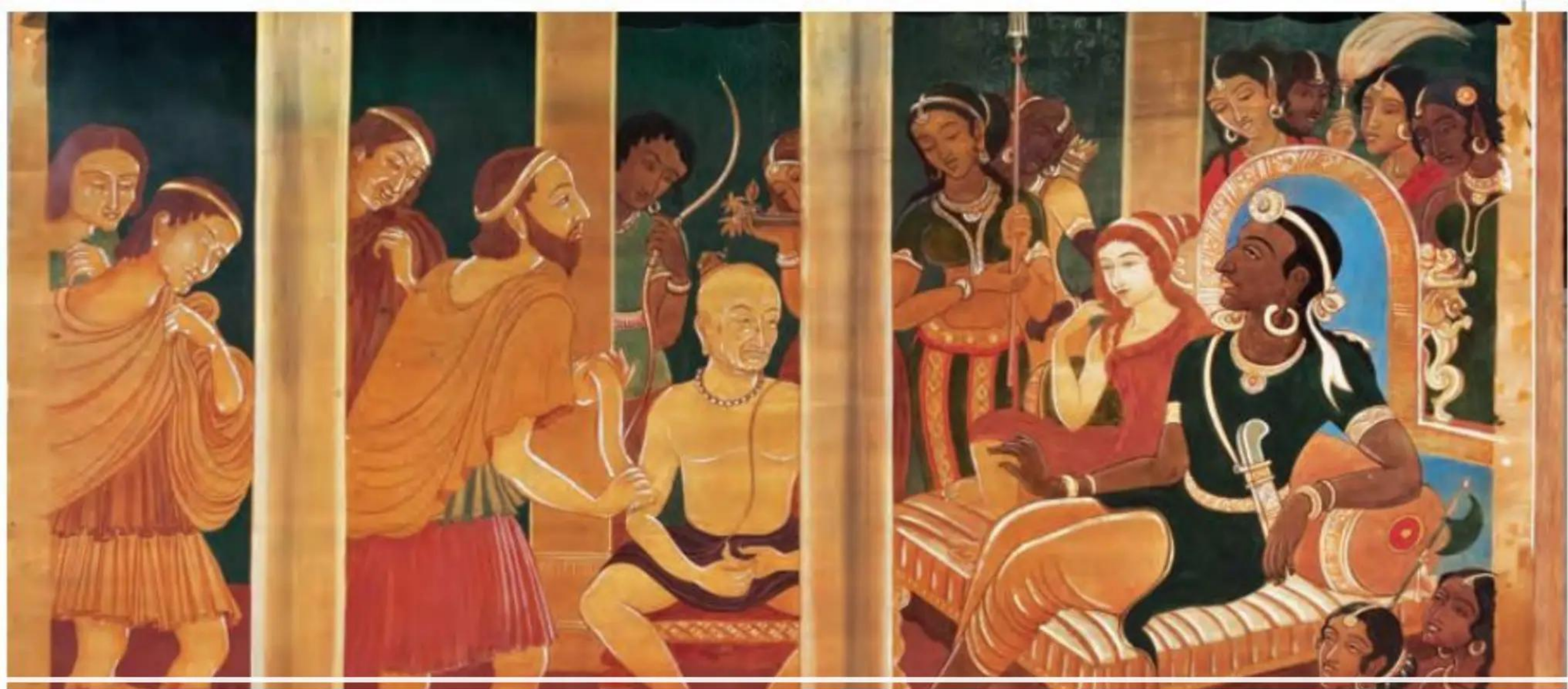
Megasthenes wrote **Indika**, one of the earliest accounts of India (now mostly lost).



Nanda Empire



Maurya Empire



Megasthenes in the court of Chandragupta Maurya (A 20th-century painting by Asit Kumar Haldar)



Kauṭilya's concept of a kingdom



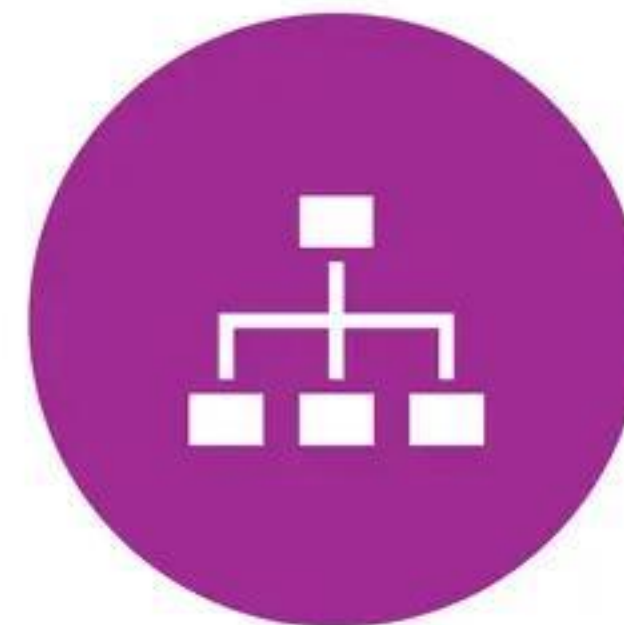
Kauṭilya's ideas are detailed in his work **Arthaśhāstra** ("science of governance and economics").



The book covers areas such as **defense, economics, administration, justice, urban planning, agriculture, and welfare.**

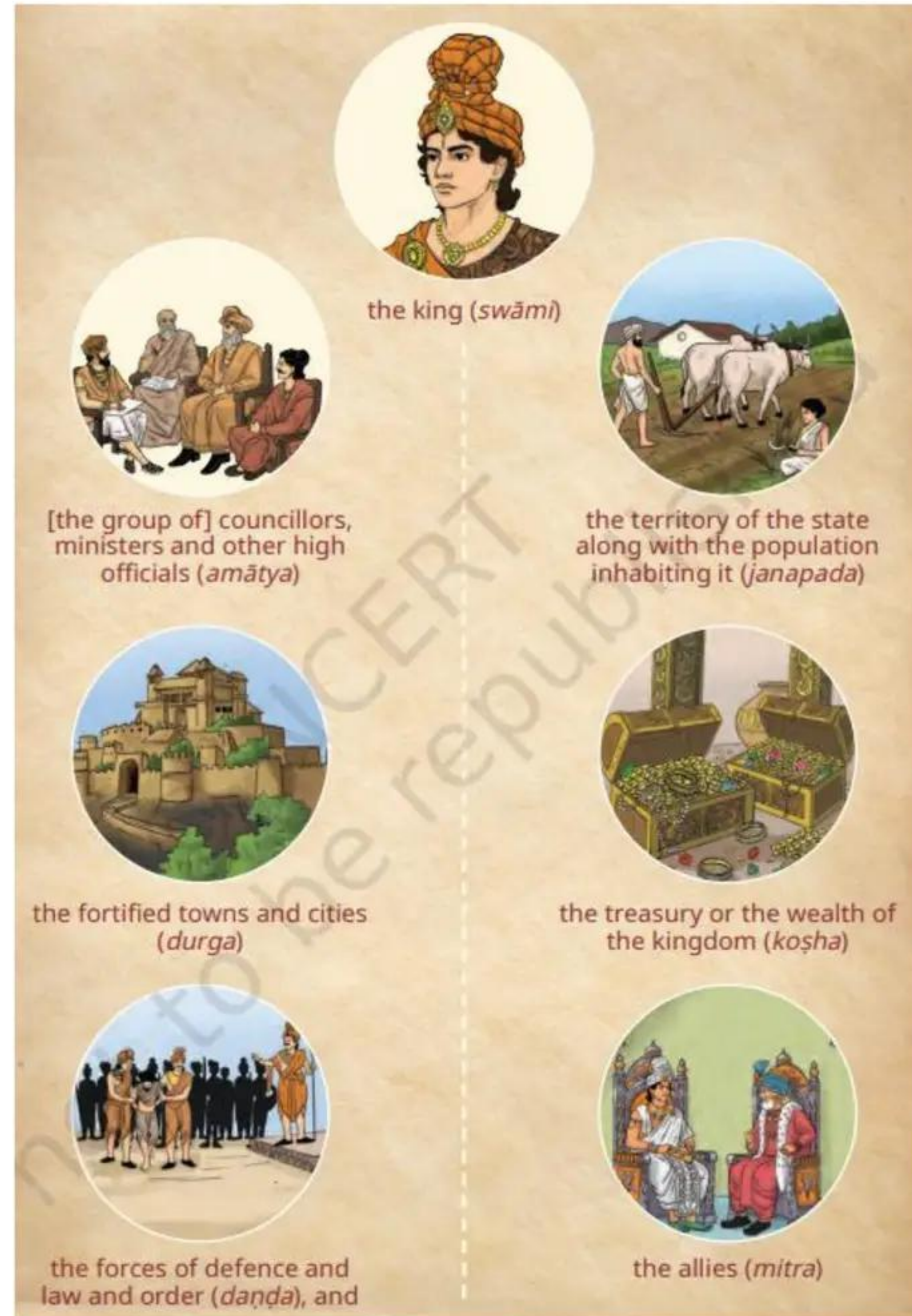


A key concept is **Saptānga** — the **seven parts that make up a kingdom.**



These principles guided the **establishment, management, and consolidation** of a strong kingdom.

Kautilya's Saptāṅga



Kauṭilya's Views on the Saptanga and Governance

The **Saptanga** (seven parts) together create a **stable, secure, and prosperous kingdom**.

The kingdom is maintained through a balance of **warfare and peaceful alliances**.

Law and order are vital, requiring a **strong administration**.

Kauṭilya detailed laws to **combat corruption** and ensure **people's welfare**.

Strict **punishments** were prescribed for actions harming society.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Why was conducting military campaigns especially in distant lands considered costly and difficult?

How did trade contribute to the maintenance and prosperity of an empire?

What were some of the main goods traded in ancient India?

What role did guilds (śreṇīs) play in ancient Indian trade and society?

How did the institution of guilds demonstrate the self-organizing abilities of Indian society?

What factors contributed to the rise of Magadha as a dominant kingdom?

Who was Mahāpadma Nanda, and what was his significance in Magadha's history?

Why did the Nanda dynasty fall, and which empire succeeded it?

Who was Kauṭilya, and what was his role in the establishment of the Maurya Empire?

What is the Saptānga concept in Kauṭilya's Arthaśhāstra, and why is it important for governance?

If you want, I can also help you with answers or multiple-choice versions!



Aśhoka visiting the Ramagrama stūpa in Nepal (from a panel at the Sānchi stūpa)



The King Who Chose Peace

Ashoka, Chandragupta's grandson, ruled the Maurya Empire from 268 to 232 BCE.

He expanded the empire to cover almost the entire Indian subcontinent except the southernmost region.

His empire included present-day Bangladesh, Pakistan, and parts of Afghanistan.

Ashoka is known for significant administrative and religious achievements.

After a major battle, he adopted policies promoting peace and welfare.

Ashoka

Ashoka embraced Buddhist teachings and promoted them widely.

He sent emissaries to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Central Asia, and beyond to spread Buddhism.

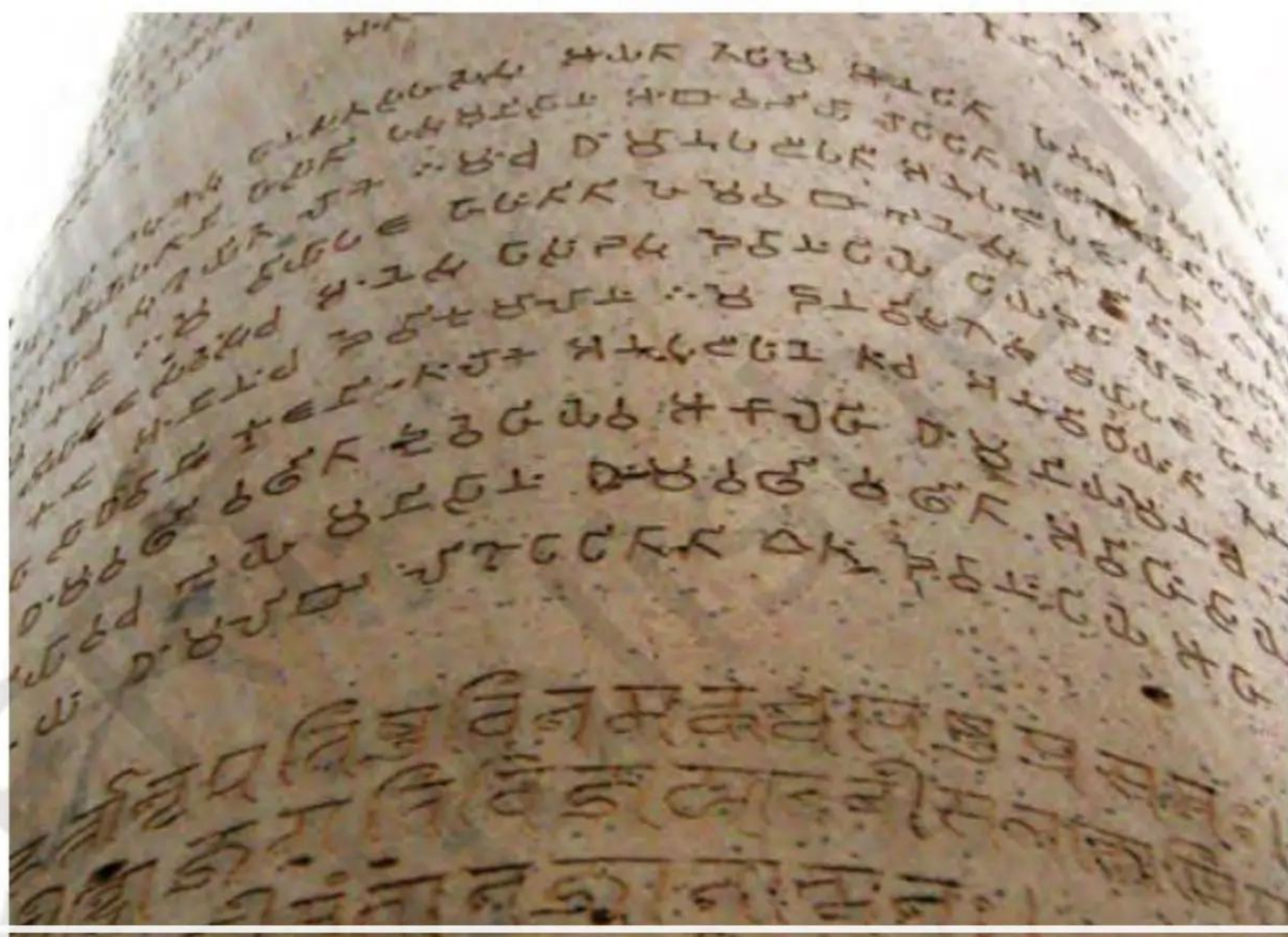
Ashoka issued edicts—official declarations—engraved on rocks and pillars across his empire.

These edicts encouraged people to follow dharma (moral law).

The edicts were mostly written in Prakrit language using the Brahmi script.

A few of the
many Aśhokan
edicts across
the
Subcontinent





(Left) A reproduction of a part of Aśhoka's rock edict at Girnar, Gujarat. (Right) Detail of the Topra Aśhokan pillar at Feroz Shah Kotla, Delhi



Ashoka

- Ashoka called himself 'Devanampiya Piyadasi,' meaning 'Beloved of the Gods' and 'kind to others.'
- He portrayed himself as a compassionate and benevolent ruler in his edicts.
- Ashoka supported welfare beyond his empire, providing medical care for people and animals.
- He promoted nature conservation by prohibiting hunting and cruelty to animals.
- Ashoka encouraged religious tolerance, urging different sects to learn from each other's teachings.



Sohagaura
copper plate
inscription,
dating back to
the 4th–3rd
century BCE

Life in the Mauryan period

The Maurya Empire lasted about 50 years after Ashoka's death.

Ashoka's successors could not keep the empire united, leading to the rise of independent smaller kingdoms.

Around 185 BCE, a new phase in India's history began.

Pataliputra

- Cities like Pataliputra were important centers of governance and trade with palaces and planned streets.
- A strong taxation system and active merchants and artisans helped maintain prosperity.
- A large part of the population was involved in agriculture.
- Agriculture was a major source of revenue for the Maurya Empire.
- Two crops were grown annually due to rains in summer and winter.
- This helped prevent famines, ensuring ample food supply.
- Granaries were well-stocked, and farmers were protected from war disruptions.

Pataliputra



BLACKSMITHS, POTTERS,
CARPENTERS, AND
JEWELLERS WERE COMMON
ARTISANS IN CITIES.



CITIES WERE WELL-
PLANNED WITH STREET
SIGNS AND WATER VESSELS
FOR FIRE EMERGENCIES.



COMMUNICATION WAS
MAINTAINED THROUGH
COURIERS DELIVERING
MESSAGES.



HOUSES WERE MADE OF
WOOD AND COULD BE UP
TO TWO STOREYS TALL.



PEOPLE WORE COTTON
GARMENTS—LOWER
GARMENTS REACHING
BELOW THE KNEE AND
UPPER GARMENTS OVER THE
SHOULDERS; SOME WORE
LEATHER SHOES WITH THICK
SOLES.

The Mauryas were renowned for their highly polished stone pillars, as can be seen in this capital of the Sarnath pillar

- The pillar capital at Sarnath is a famous example of Mauryan art.
- It was erected by Ashoka near Varanasi, where Buddha gave his first teaching.
- The capital features four lions symbolizing royal power.
- Below the lions, four animals (elephant, bull, horse, and lion) are depicted on a ring.
- The dharmachakra (wheel of dharma) on the capital represents Buddha's teachings.



Some Contributions of the Mauryas Life and people



Fig. 5.21. Terracotta figurine of a dancing girl (notice her elaborate headdress, hairstyle and jewellery).



Fig. 5.22. Terracotta figurine of a female deity.



Fig. 5.23. Female deity (yakshi) holding a fly whisk.



Fig. 5.24. Terracotta of Saptamātrikās or seven mother goddesses (a continuing tradition).

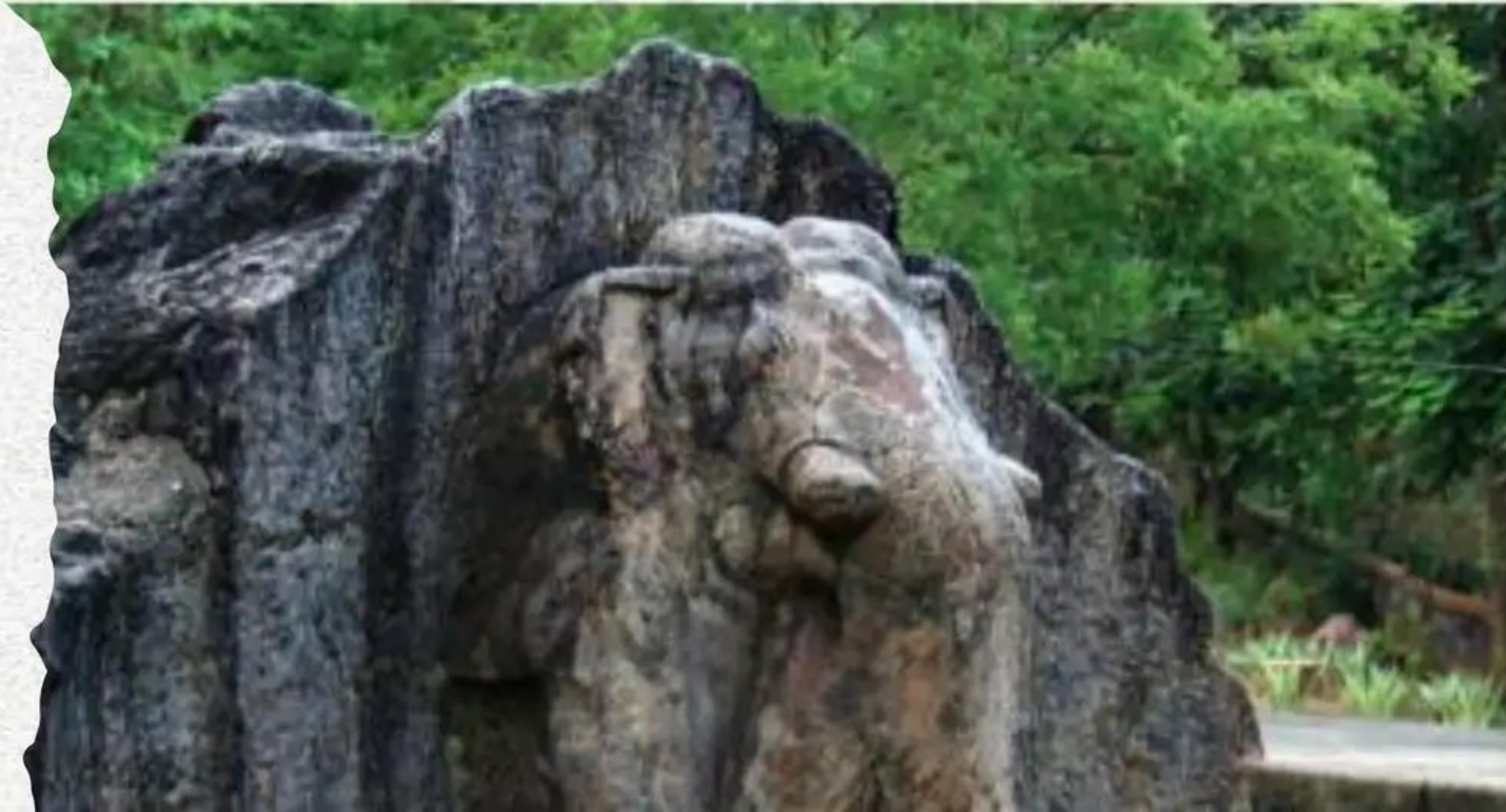


Fig. 5.25. Head of a terracotta horse (notice the elaborate design of the bridle).

Art and architecture

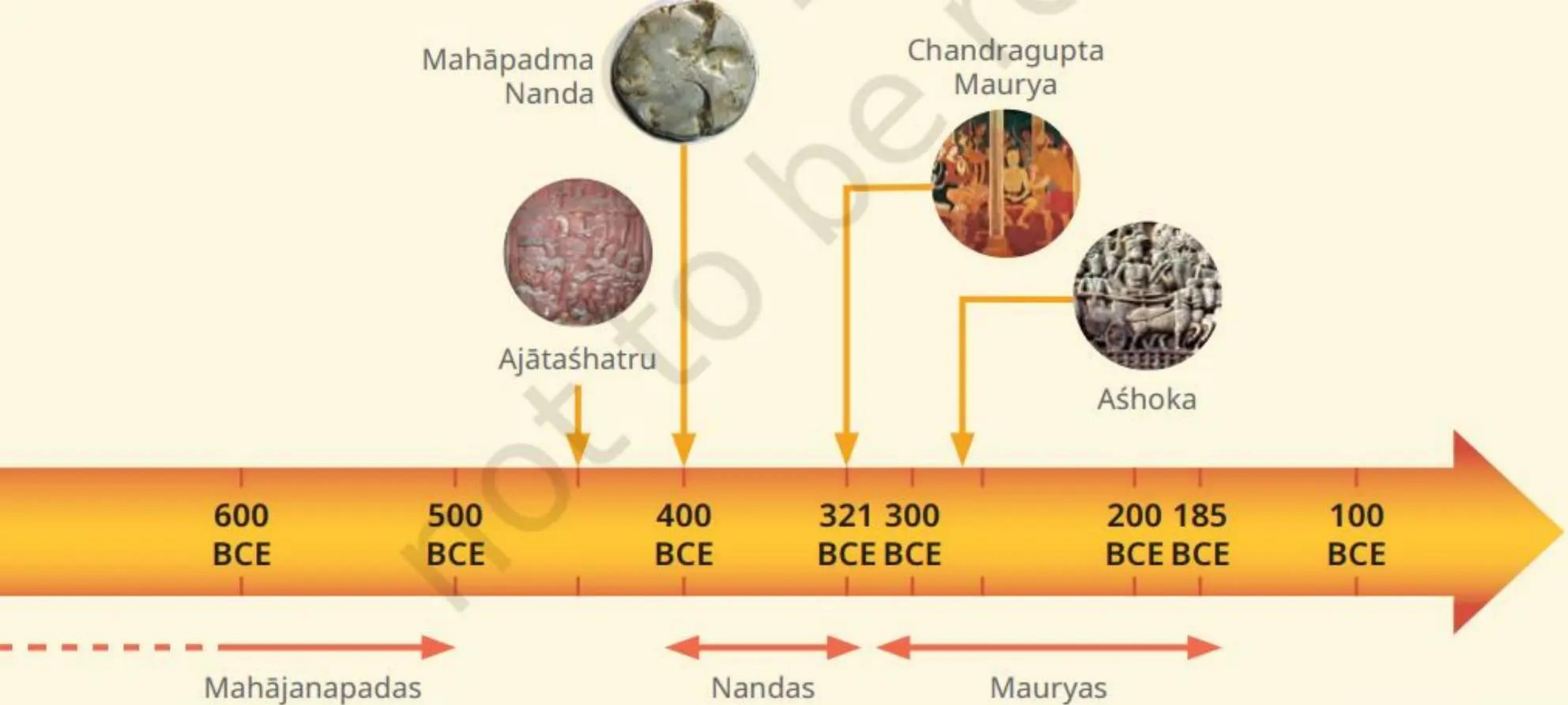


5.26. As one of India's oldest stone structures, the Great Stūpa at Sanchi is among the finest examples of Indian architecture. Note that the original structure was made of bricks and was later enlarged using stone. Ashoka is said to have constructed many such stūpas, chaityas, and vihāras for worship, study, and meditation.



A hoard of Mauryan punch-marked coins, A punch-marked coin of Aśhoka





TIMELINE

India's National Emblem

- The Sarnath pillar capital was chosen as India's national emblem.
- The emblem includes the Sanskrit motto "**satyameva jayate**" meaning "truth alone triumphs."
- This motto comes from the *Mundaka Upanishad*.
- The full phrase is "**satyameva jayate nānritam**" meaning "truth alone triumphs, not falsehood."
- The dharmachakra from the capital is also featured at the center of India's national flag.



सत्यमेव जयते



TEST NOW

- Who was Aśhoka and what were his major achievements?
 - How far did Aśhoka expand the Maurya Empire?
 - What role did Aśhoka play in spreading Buddhism?
 - What were Ashoka's edicts and what messages did they convey?
 - Explain the meaning of the title 'Devanampiya Piyadasi' used by Ashoka.
 - How did Ashoka contribute to animal welfare and nature conservation?
 - What happened to the Maurya Empire after Ashoka's death?
-

COMPLETE NOW

- Describe the life and trade activities in Mauryan cities like Pataliputra.
- What information does Megasthenes provide about agriculture during the Mauryan period?
- What were the characteristics of cities during the Mauryan Empire?
- Describe the significance of the Sarnath pillar capital erected by Ashoka.
- How is the Sarnath pillar capital connected to modern India's national symbols?
- What is the meaning of the motto "satyameva jayate" and where does it come from?



THANK YOU FOR NOW

