CHAPTER 9

NEW EMPIRES AND KINGDOMS

0654CH10

Arvind plays a king

Arvind had been chosen to act as a king in the school play. He had expected to march solemnly in splendid robes, to twirl his moustaches and wield the silver-paper wrapped sword with gusto. Imagine his surprise when he was told he would also have to sit and play a *veena*, and recite poetry! A musician-king? Who was that? he wondered.



Prashastis and what they tell us

Arvind was supposed to be acting as Samudragupta, a famous ruler of a dynasty known as the Guptas. We know about Samudragupta from a long inscription, inscribed on the Ashokan pillar at Allahabad. It was composed as a *Kavya* by Harishena, who was a poet and a minister at the court of Samudragupta.

This inscription is of a special kind known as a *prashasti*, a Sanskrit word, meaning 'in praise of'. While *prashastis* were composed for some of the rulers you read about in Chapter 8, such as Gautamiputra Shri Satakarni, they became far more important from the time of the Guptas.

Samudragupta's prashasti

Let us see what Samudragupta's *prashasti* tells us. The poet praised the king in glowing terms — as a warrior, as a king who won victories in battle, who was learned and the best of poets. He is also described as equal to the gods. The *prashasti* was composed in very long sentences. Here is a part of one such sentence:

Samudragupta the warrior

Whose body was most charming, being covered with the plenteous beauty of the marks of hundreds of scars caused by battle-axes, arrows, spikes, spears, barbed darts, swords, iron clubs, javelins, barbed arrows, long arrows and many other weapons.

What does this description tell you about the king? And also about how kings fought wars?





The king who played the veena.
Some other qualities of Samudragupta are shown on coins such as this one, where he is shown playing the veena.

If you look at Map 7 (page 87), you will notice an area shaded in green. You will also find a series of red dots along the east coast. And you will find areas marked in purple and blue as well.

This map is based on the information provided in the *prashasti*. Harishena describes four different kinds of rulers, and tells us about Samudragupta's policies towards them.

1. The rulers of *Aryavarta*, the area shaded in green on the map. Here there were nine rulers who were uprooted, and their kingdoms were made a part of Samudragupta's empire.

2. The rulers of *Dakshinapatha*. Here there were twelve rulers, some of whose capitals are marked with red dots on the map. They surrendered to Samudragupta after being defeated and he then allowed them to rule again.

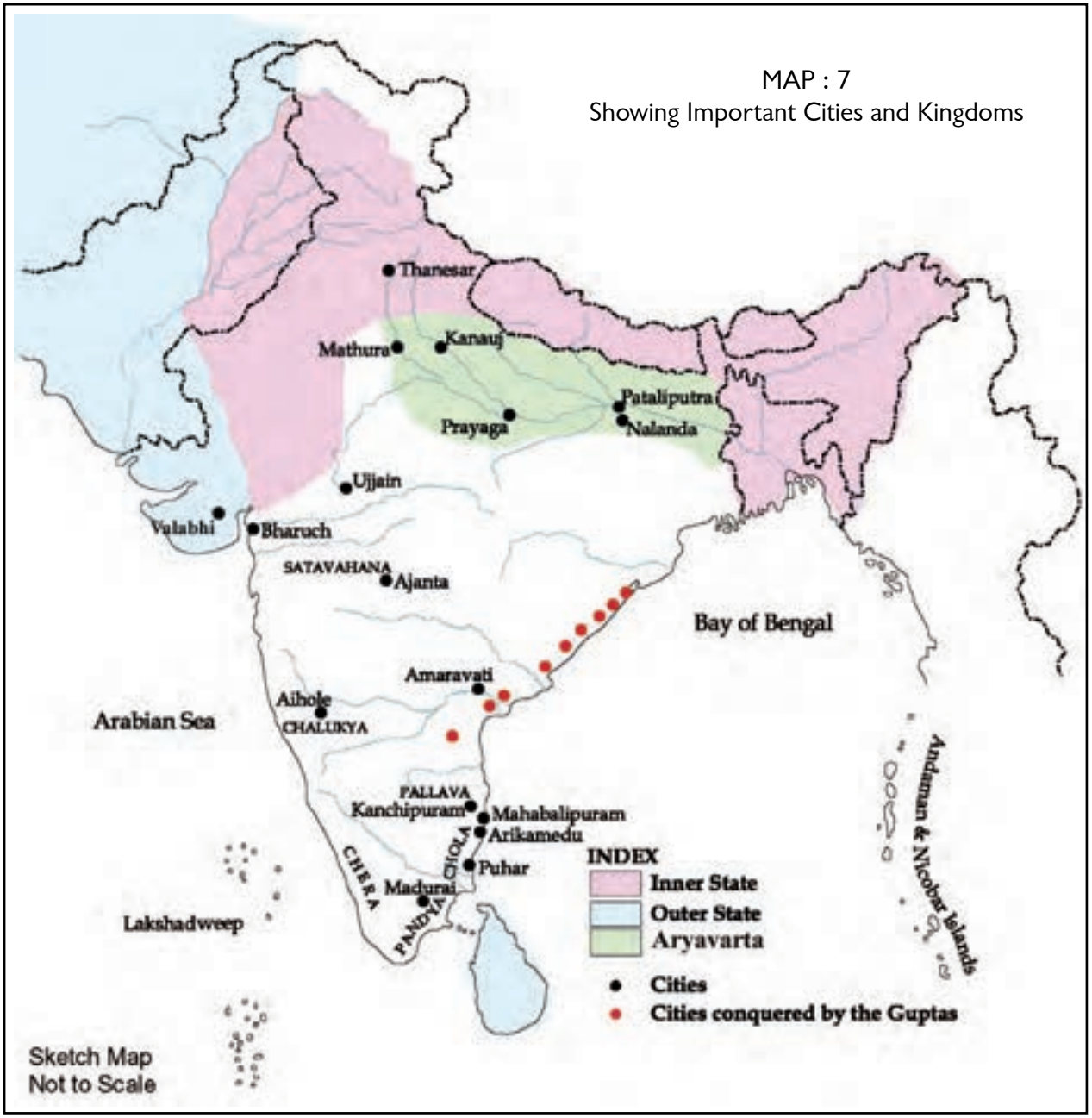
3. The inner circle of neighbouring states, including Assam, coastal Bengal, Nepal, and a number of *gana sanghas* (remember Chapter 5) in the north-west, marked in purple on the map. They brought tribute, followed his orders, and attended his court.

4. The rulers of the outlying areas, marked in blue on the map, perhaps the descendants of the Kushanas and Shakas, and the ruler of Sri Lanka, who submitted to him and offered daughters in marriage.

Find Prayaga (the old name for Allahabad), Ujjain and Pataliputra (Patna) on the map. These were important centres of the Gupta rulers.

What was the difference between the way in which Samudragupta treated the rulers of Aryavarta and Dakshinapatha?

Can you suggest any reasons for this difference?



MAP : 7
Showing Important Cities and Kingdoms

Vikram Samvat

The era beginning in the 58 BCE is traditionally associated with Gupta king, Chandragupta II, who had founded it as a mark of victory over the Shakas and assumed the title of Vikramaditya.

Genealogies

Most *prashastis* also mention the ancestors of the ruler. This one mentions Samudragupta's great grandfather, grandfather, father and mother. His mother, Kumara devi, belonged to the Lichchhavi *gana*, while his father, Chandragupta, was the first ruler of the Gupta dynasty to adopt the grand title of *maharaj-adhiraja*, a title that Samudragupta also used. His great grandfather and grandfather are mentioned simply as *maha-rajas*. It seems as if the family gradually rose to importance.

Arrange these titles in order of importance: *raja, maharaj-adhiraja, maha-raja.*

Samudragupta in turn figures in the genealogies (lists of ancestors) of later rulers of the dynasty, such as his son, Chandragupta II. We know about him from inscriptions and coins. He led an expedition to western India, where he overcame the last of the Shakas. According to later belief, his court was full of learned people. About some of them you will read in Chapter 10.

Harshavardhana and the Harshacharita

While we can learn about the Gupta rulers from their inscriptions and coins, we can find out about some kings from biographies. Harshavardhana, who ruled nearly 1400 years ago, was one such ruler. His court poet, Banabhatta, wrote his biography, the *Harshacharita*, in Sanskrit. This gives us the genealogy of Harsha, and ends with his becoming king. Xuan Zang, about whom you read in Chapter 8, also spent a lot of time at Harsha's court and left a detailed account of what he saw.

Harsha was not the eldest son of his father, but became king of Thanesar after both his father and elder brother died. His brother-in-law was the ruler of Kanauj (see Map 7) and he was killed by the ruler of Bengal. Harsha took over the kingdom of Kanauj, and then led an army against the ruler of Bengal.

Although he was successful in the east, and conquered Magadha and probably Bengal also, he was not as successful elsewhere. He tried to cross the Narmada to march into the Deccan, but was stopped by a ruler belonging to the Chalukya dynasty, Pulakeshin II.

Look at political map of India and list the present-day states which Harshavardhana passed through when he went (a) to Bengal and (b) up to the Narmada.

The Pallavas, Chalukyas and Pulakeshin's prashasti

The Pallavas and Chalukyas were the most important ruling dynasties in south India during this period. The kingdom of the Pallavas spread from the region around their capital, Kanchipuram, to the Kaveri delta, while that of the Chalukyas was centred around the Raichur Doab, between the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra.

Aihole, the capital of the Chalukyas, was an important trading centre (see Map 7). It developed as a religious centre, with a number of temples. The Pallavas and Chalukyas frequently raided one another's lands, especially attacking the capital cities, which were prosperous towns.

The best-known Chalukya ruler was Pulakeshin II. We know about him from a *prashasti*, composed by his court poet Ravikirti. This tells us about his ancestors, who are traced back through four generations from father to son. Pulakeshin evidently got the kingdom from his uncle.

According to Ravikirti, he led expeditions along both the west and the east coasts. Besides, he checked the advance of Harsha. There is an interesting play of words in the poem. Harsha means happiness. The poet says that after this defeat, Harsha was no longer Harsha! Pulakeshin also attacked the Pallava king, who took shelter behind the walls of Kanchipuram.

But the Chalukya victory was short-lived. Ultimately, both the Pallavas and the Chalukyas gave way to new rulers belonging to the Rashtrakuta and Chola dynasties, about which you will study in Class VII.

Who were the other rulers who tried to control the coasts and why? (Hint: see Chapter 8).

How were these kingdoms administered?

As in the case of earlier kings, land revenue remained important for these rulers, and the village remained the basic unit of administration.
There were some new developments as well. Kings adopted a number of steps to win the support of men who were powerful, either economically, or socially, or because of their political and military strength. For instance:

- Some important administrative posts were now hereditary. This means that sons succeeded fathers to these posts. For example, the poet Harishena was a *maha-danda-nayaka*, or chief judicial officer, like his father.
- Sometimes, one person held many offices. For instance, besides being a *maha-danda-nayaka*, Harishena was a *kumar-amatya*, meaning an important minister, and a *sandhi-vigrahika*, meaning a minister of war and peace.
- Besides, important men probably had a say in local administration. These included the *nagara-shreshthi* or chief banker or merchant of the city,

the *sarthavaha* or leader of the merchant caravans, the *prathama-kulika* or the chief craftsman, and the head of the *kayasthas* or scribes.

These policies were reasonably effective, but sooner or later, some of these powerful men grew strong enough to set up independent kingdoms.

What do you think may have been the advantages and disadvantages of having hereditary officers?

A new kind of army

Like earlier rulers, some of these kings maintained a well-organised army, with elephants, chariots, cavalry and foot soldiers. Besides, there were military leaders who provided the king with troops whenever he needed them. They were not paid regular salaries. Instead, some of them received grants of land. They collected revenue from the land and used this to maintain soldiers and horses, and provide equipment for warfare. These men were known as *samantas*. Whenever the ruler was weak, *samantas* tried to become independent.

Assemblies in the southern kingdoms

The inscriptions of the Pallavas mention a number of local assemblies. These included the *sabha*, which was an assembly of *brahmin* landowners. This assembly functioned through sub-committees, which looked after irrigation, agricultural operations, making roads, local temples, etc.

The *ur* was a village assembly found in areas where the landowners were not *brahmins*. And the *nagaram* was an organisation of merchants. It is likely that these assemblies were controlled by rich and powerful landowners and merchants. Many of these local assemblies continued to function for centuries.

Ordinary people in the kingdoms

We can catch an occasional glimpse of the lives of ordinary people from plays, and other accounts. Let us look at some of these.

Kalidasa is known for his plays depicting life in the king's court. An interesting feature about these plays is that the king and most *brahmins* are shown as speaking Sanskrit, while women and men other than the king and *brahmins* use Prakrit. His most famous play, 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam', is the story of the love between a king named Dushyanta and a young woman named Shakuntala. We find an interesting description of the plight of a poor fisherman in this play.

A fisherman finds a ring

A fisherman found a precious ring, which the king had given to Shakuntala, but which had been accidentally swallowed by a fish. When he went to the palace with it, the gatemen accused him of theft, and the chief police officer was rather rude. However, the king was happy when he saw the ring and sent a reward for the fisherman. Then, the police officer and the gatemen decided to take a share of the reward, and went along with the fisherman to have a drink.

Do you think that if a poor man finds something and reports this to the police he would be treated like this today?

Name a famous man who taught in Prakrit and a king who issued inscriptions in Prakrit (hint: see Chapters 6 and 7)

The Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian noticed the plight of those who were treated as untouchables by the high and mighty. They were expected to live on the outskirts of the city. He writes: "If such a man enters a town or a market place, he strikes a piece of wood, in order to keep himself separate; people, hearing this sound, know what it means and avoid touching him or brushing against him."

And Banabhatta provides us with a vivid picture of the king's army on the move:

The king's army

The king travelled with an enormous amount of equipment. Apart from weapons, there were things of daily use such as pots, pans, furniture, golden footstools, food, including animals such as goat, deer, rabbits, vegetables, spices, carried on carts or loaded on to pack animals such as camels and elephants. This huge army was accompanied by musicians beating drums, and others playing horns and trumpets.

Villagers had to provide hospitality along the way. They came with gifts of curds, *gur* and flowers, and provided fodder for the animals. They also tried to meet the king, and place their complaints and petitions before him.

The army left a trail of destruction behind. Elephants often trampled down the huts of villagers, and the oxen yoked to the caravans of merchants ran away, scared by the tumult.

As Banabhatta says: "The whole world was swallowed up in dust."

Make a list of all the things that were carried with the army.

What did the villagers bring for the king?

Imagine

Harshavardhana's army will visit your village next week. Your parents are preparing for the visit. Describe what they say and do.

Let's recall



1. State whether true or false:

   (a) Harishena composed a *prashasti* in praise of Gautamiputra Shri Satakarni.

   (b) The rulers of Aryavarta brought tribute for Samudragupta.

   (c) There were twelve rulers in Dakshinapatha.

   (d) Taxila and Madurai were important centres under the control of the Gupta rulers.

   (e) Aihole was the capital of the Pallavas.

   (f) Local assemblies functioned for several centuries in south India.

2. Mention three authors who wrote about Harshavardhana.

3. What changes do you find in the army at this time?

4. What were the new administrative arrangements during this period?

KEYWORDS
prashasti
Aryavarta
Dakshinapatha
genealogy
hereditary officer
samanta
assembly
nagaram

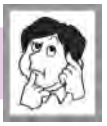
Let's discuss



5. What do you think Arvind would have to do if he was acting as Samudragupta?

6. Do you think ordinary people would have read and understood the *prashastis?* Give reasons for your answer.

Let's do



7. If you had to make a genealogy for yourself, who are the people you would include in it? How many generations would you like to show? Make a chart and fill it.

8. How do you think wars affect the lives of ordinary people today?

SOME IMPORTANT
DATES

- Beginning of the Gupta dynasty (about 1700 years ago)
- The rule of Harshavardhana (about 1400 years ago)