

Polity, and in governance administration ancient India



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Vaishali
(Bihar)

A few definitions

- **BCE / CE = BC / AD.**
- **Ethics: *dharma, nīti, nītiśāstra.***
- **Polity / governance / administration: *rājadharmā, rājyashāstra, nītiśāstra, arthashāstra, daṇḍanīti, rāshtratantra, dharmādhikāra, etc.***
- **State / territory: *desha, kshetra, rājya, rāshṭra, maṇḍala, janapada, chakra, varsha, etc.***

India

- Not a nation in the current sense; the colonial vaunt that “India did not exist before the British rule”.
- A geographical entity: *Āryavarta*, *Bhārata*, *Bharatavarsha*, *Jambudvīpa*. (E.g., “The country that lies north of the ocean, and south of the snowy mountains, is called Bhārata” — *Vishnu Purāna*, 2.3.1)
- A cultural entity with a sacred geography common to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and other sects.
- Perceptible (if not definable) as one entity to Greek, Roman, Chinese, Arab and European travellers, who wrote about “India” and “Indians”.

The Indus civilization



An assembly hall at Mohenjo-daro?

Was Mohenjo-daro the capital of a “Harappan Empire”?



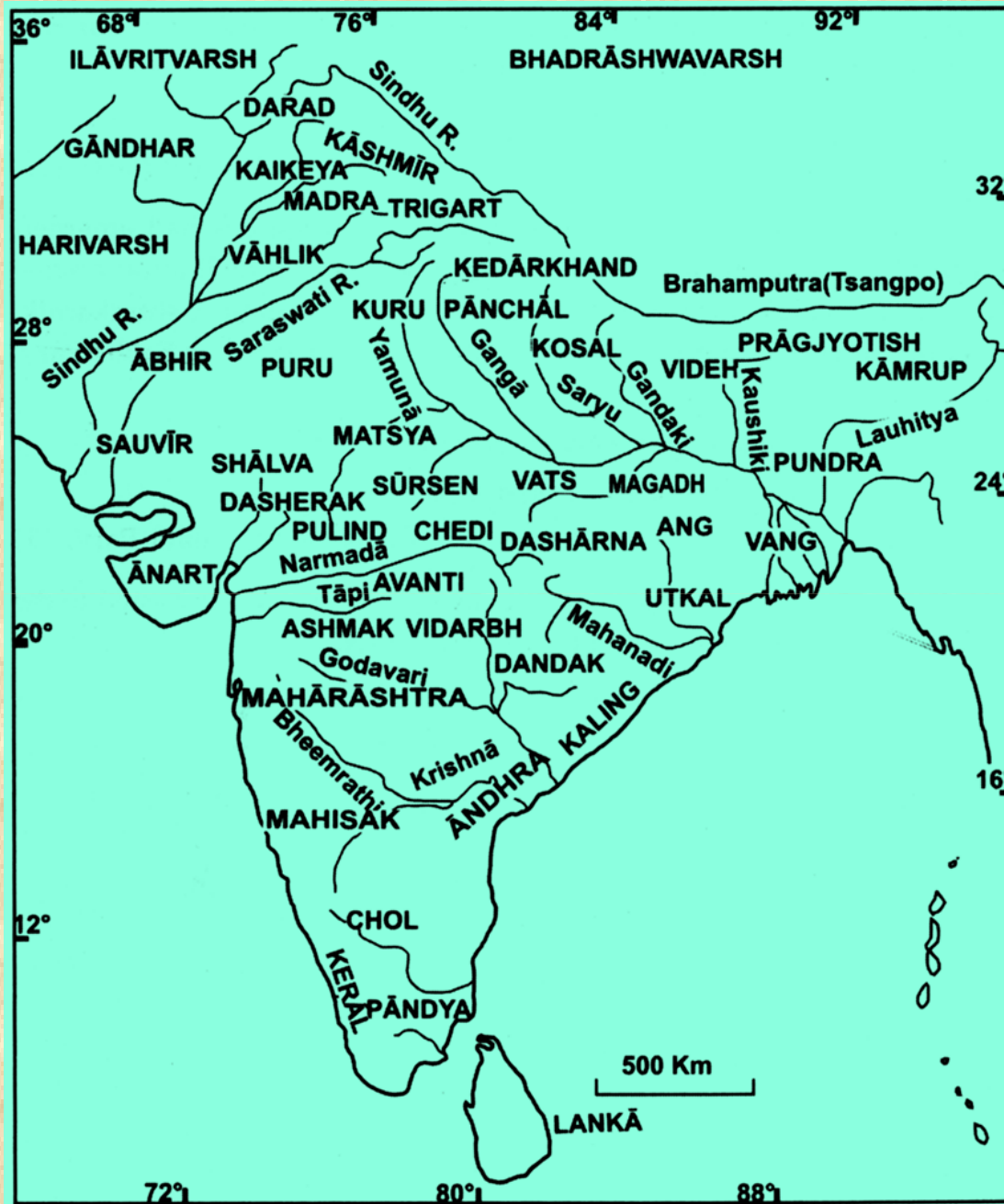
Several city-states?
(G.L. Possehl)

The Vedic age

- In the Rig-Veda, gods (Indra, Agni, Soma, Yama, Varuṇa...) are often addressed as “King”, yet the ruler is not deified.
- The Rig-Veda uses words like *rāja*, *adhirāja*, *samrāj*, but also *sabhā*, *samiti*. A “tribal” system of chieftains or a more elaborate assembly system?
- A good king was expected to visit his *samiti* (10.166.4).
- Prayers for the *samiti* “to be ever in agreement with the king” (e.g., Atharva-Veda, 6.88.3).
- Some evidence of election: “The people elect you to rulership, the wide glorious quarters elect you. Be seated on this high point in the body of the state and from there vigorously distribute the natural wealth” (Atharva-Veda, 3.4.2).
- The king does not seem to have absolute power.

The early historical age: innovations

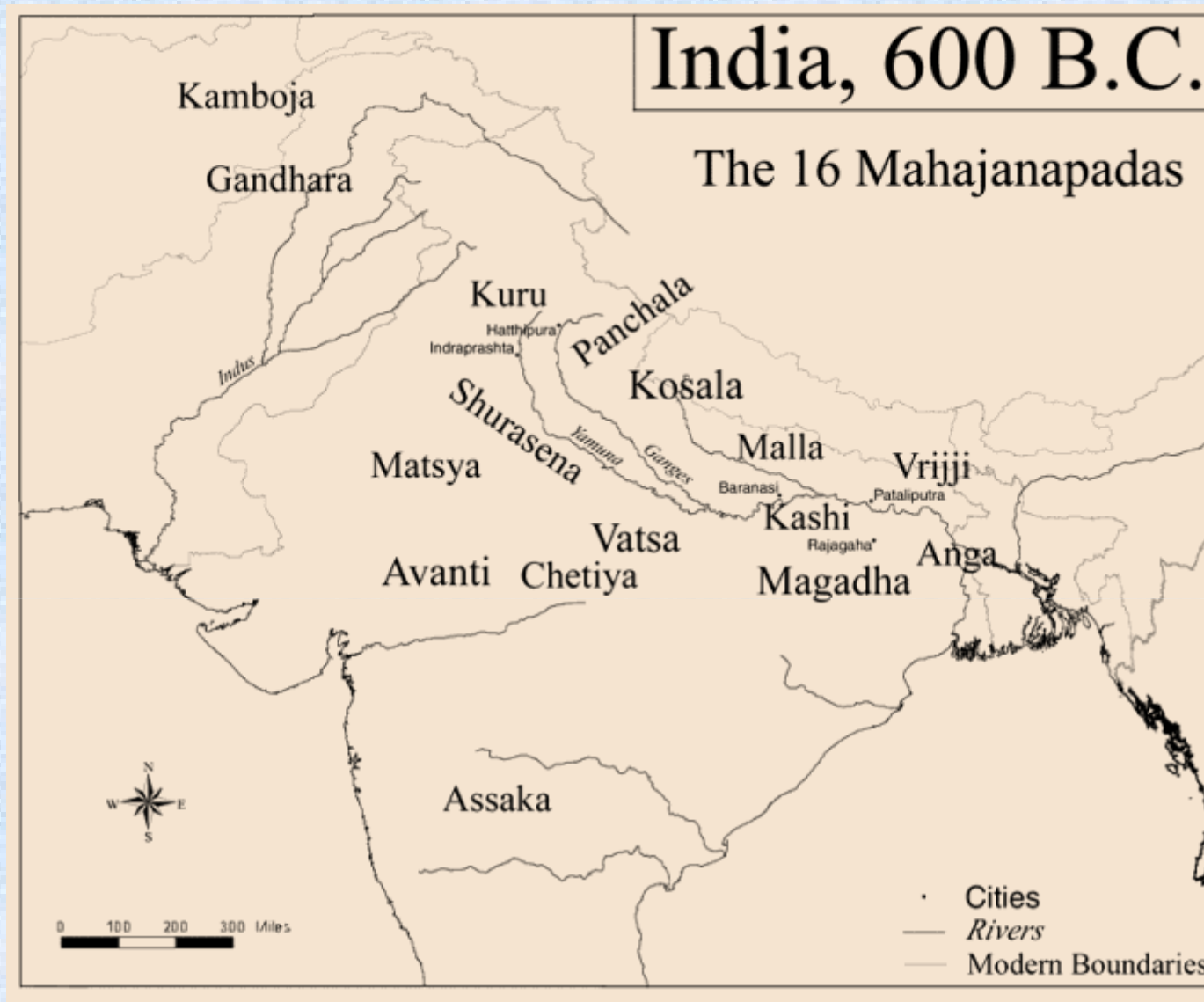
- **Widespread use of iron technology.**
- **Emergence of organized states; warfare and political integration.**
- **Emergence of organized religions: Buddhism and Jainism; codification of Late Vedic belief and thought systems: from Upanishads to *shāstras*.**
- **Massive literary production (with or without writing).**
- **Increasing artistic production, the roots of classical Indian art.**
- **Interactions across India and beyond; expansion of trade networks. Currency comes into use.**
- **Despite (or because of?) all the wars and conquests, a cultural integration across much of India.**



The socio-political landscape of the *Mahābhārata*

(Source: K.S. Valdiya, *Geography, Peoples and Geodynamics of India in Puranas and Epics*, 2012)

- **Socially, the Epic presents a mixed society: numerous different languages, cultures, rulers and regions.**
- **363 peoples are listed on different occasions, as *janas* or *jātis*.**
- **The Epic does not distinguish between caste and tribe, in fact has no concept of a tribe in the usual sense, which is a colonial construct. (Neither do the *Purāṇas*.)**
K.S. Singh: “There is hardly any evidence to show that in the collective consciousness of India there is any difference between the two sets of janas.”
- ***Jana* = people, especially those forming a state.**
- ***Jāti* = a community of people, basically a segment of a *jana* (e.g., Kirātas, a *jana*, have several *jātis*).**
- ***Gaṇa*: a republican state; *Sangha*: a confederation of such states.**



The 16 *mahājanapadas* or “proto-republics” named in Buddhist and Jain texts, the two Epics; Pānini and Patañjali mention *janapadas*.

- **A system of assemblies down to village level was the hallmark of the *mahajanapadas* and seems to have offered actual representation. Hence the term of “proto-republics” of Buddhist times.**
- **The central assembly of the Lichchhavis (leading clan amongst the confederate clans of the Vajji *mahajanapada*, capital Vaishali) had 7,707 members! (They were all called “*rājas*”.)**
- **The assembly of the Yaudheyas (a confederation located between the Indus river and the Ganges river) had 5,000 members.**

- **A few assemblies, without a hereditary ruler, may have offered challenges of internal dissension and instability.**
- **In the *Lalitavistara*, the future Buddha is described as sitting in heaven, thinking of his impending birth. One of the questions raised is: Which family should he be born in? The other *bodhisattvas* and gods discuss and reject the candidature of the Lichchhavis of Vaishali. They say that these people do not speak to each other in the proper manner, do not follow the dharma, do not preserve the ranks of social status and age, do not become anybody's disciples, and each one thinks, “I am *rāja!* I am *rāja!*”**

Other “democratic” institutions

- The Buddhist *Sangha* took day-to-day decisions through a system of votes and quorums in the monastic assemblies.
- In the institution of the guild (*shrenī*), the headman was usually elected, and could be removed if found unsatisfactory. Executive officers were also elected; they were supposed to be well versed in the Vedas, not greedy, of noble ancestry, proficient in their craft, neither too old nor too young, etc.
- The *Jātaka* tales refer to eighteen guilds.
- “Cultivators, traders, herdsman, moneylenders, and artisans have authority to lay down rules for their respective classes” and the king was to consult their representatives while dealing with matters relating to them.
— *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, c. 3rd century BCE.
- The *Panchāyat* system (described in many inscriptions).

“Republicanism” in ancient India

The experience of Ancient India with republicanism, if better known, would by itself make democracy seem less of a freakish development, and help dispel the common idea that the very concept of democracy is specifically “Western.” ... It is especially remarkable that, during the near-millennium between 500 B.C. and 400 A.D., we find republics almost anywhere in India that our sources allow us to examine society in any detail. ... The republics of India were very likely more extensive and populous than the *poleis* of the Greeks. The existence of Indian republicanism is a discovery of the twentieth century. The implications of this phenomenon have yet to be fully digested. ... Historians may find, in the Indian past as elsewhere, plenty of raw material for a new history of the development of human government.

– Steve Muhlberger

The case of Uttaramerur

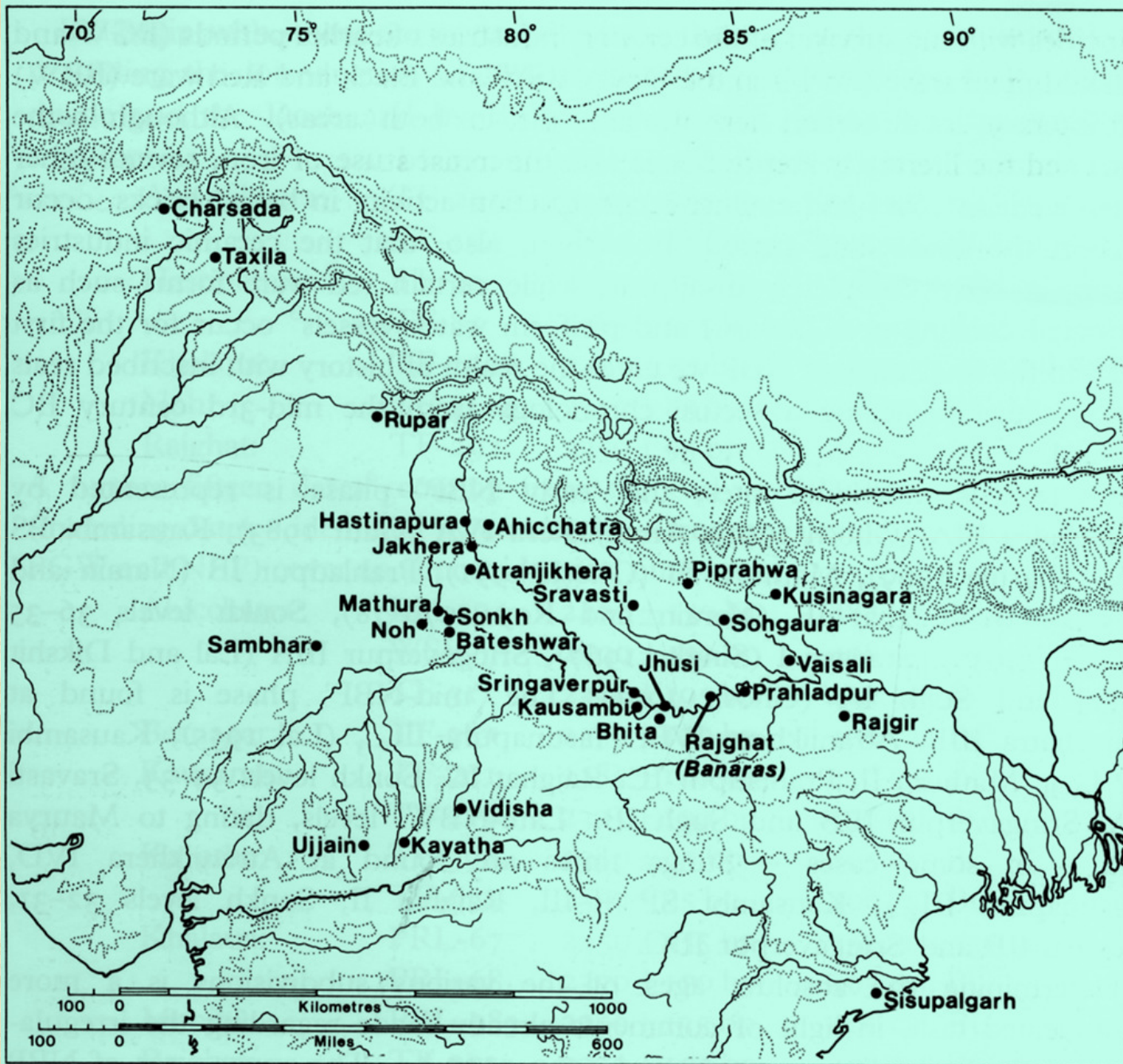
(Chola period, 10th century CE)

Qualifications required of candidates to village assemblies:

- **Knowledge (by teaching) of some Vedic texts.**
- **Ownership of tax-paying land and of a house.**
- **Age between 35 and 70.**
- **“One who possesses honest earnings, whose mind is pure and who has not been on any of the committees for the last three years.” ...**

Among the disqualifications:

- **“One who has been on any of the committees but has not submitted his accounts.”**
- **“One who has stolen the property of another.”**
- **Relatives of a candidate cannot be candidates.**



**First-
millennium
BCE sites
in north
India**

**First-
millennium
BCE sites
elsewhere in
India**



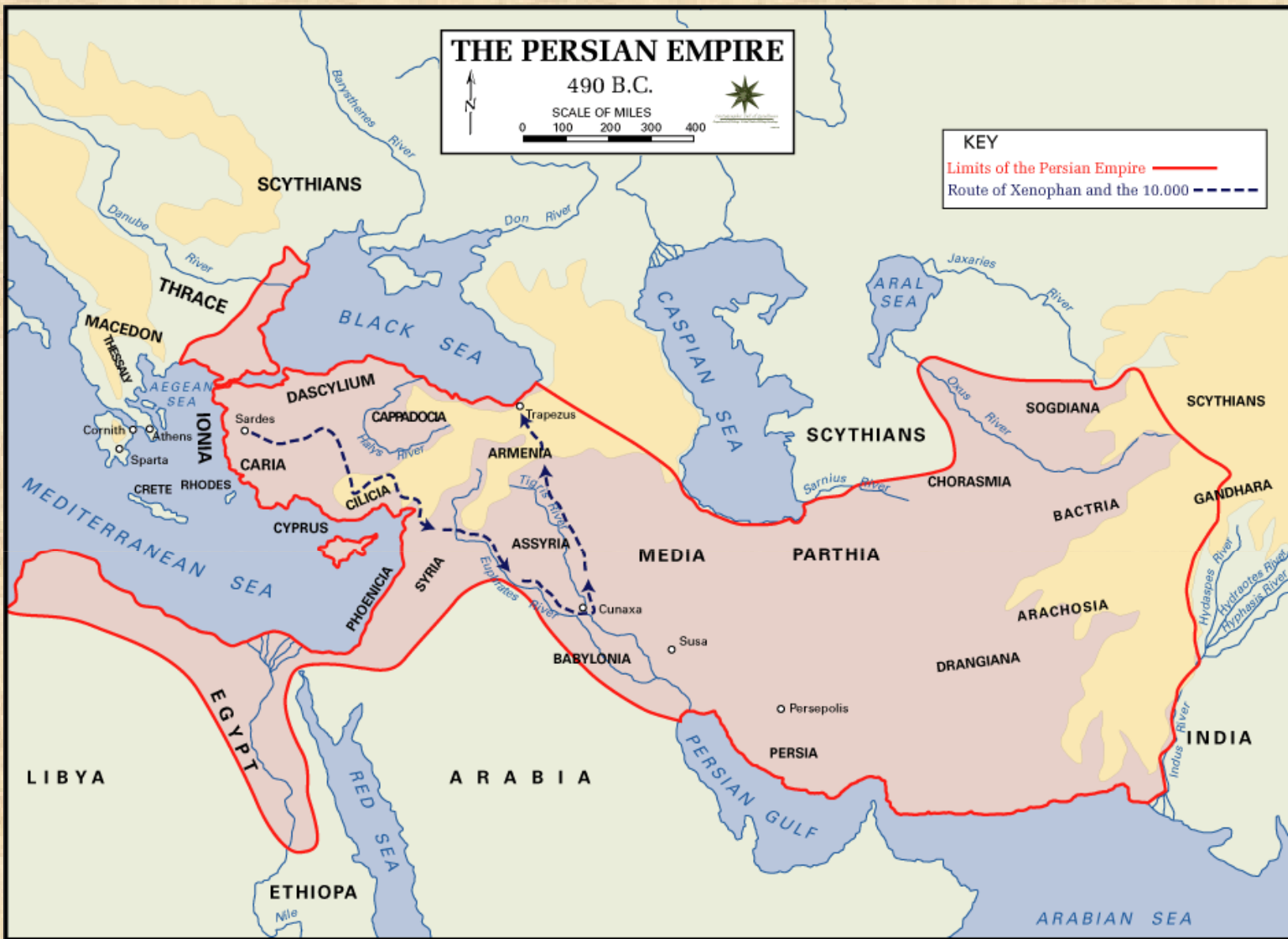


Powerful states emerged across north, central and eastern India.

Kaushambi (on the Yamuna, upstream of Allahabad): capital of the Chedi-vatsa *janapada*.

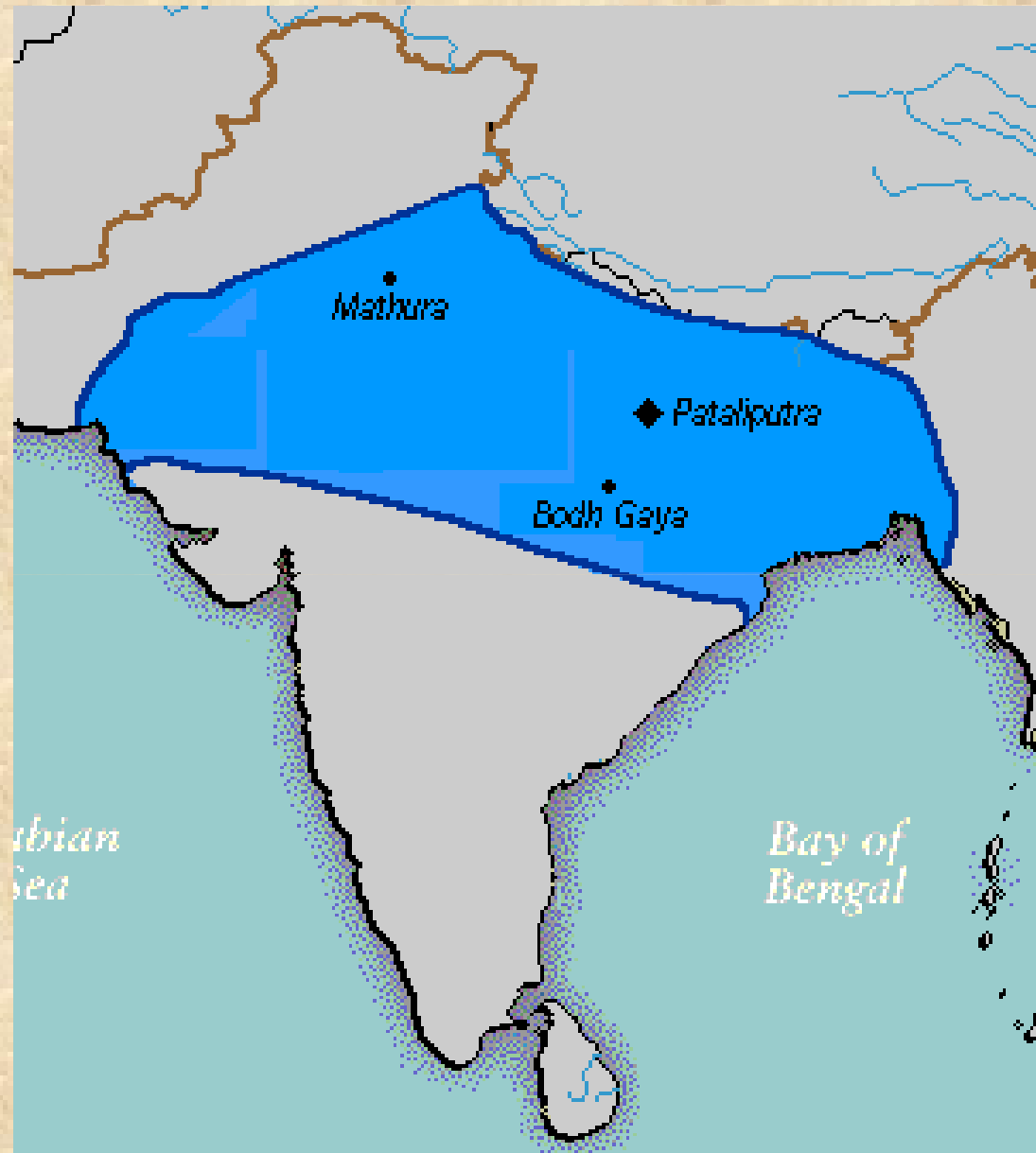


The Magadha kingdom, from the 6th century BCE, with its first capital at Rajagriha (modern Rajgir).



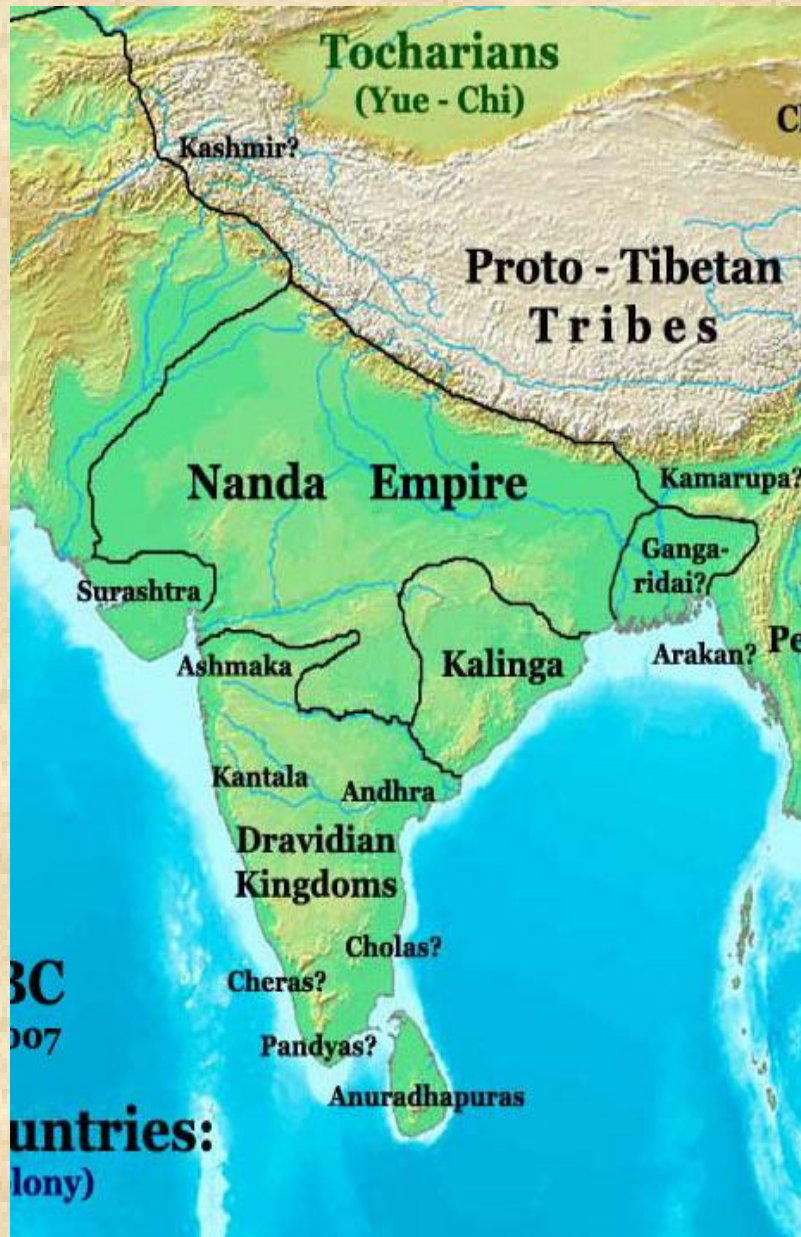
The Achaemenid Persian Empire about 490 BCE, under Darius the Great. It included the western part of the Indus valley.

The Nanda Empire, founded by Mahapadma Nanda in the 5th century BCE, was conquered in 321 BCE by Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Maurya Empire.



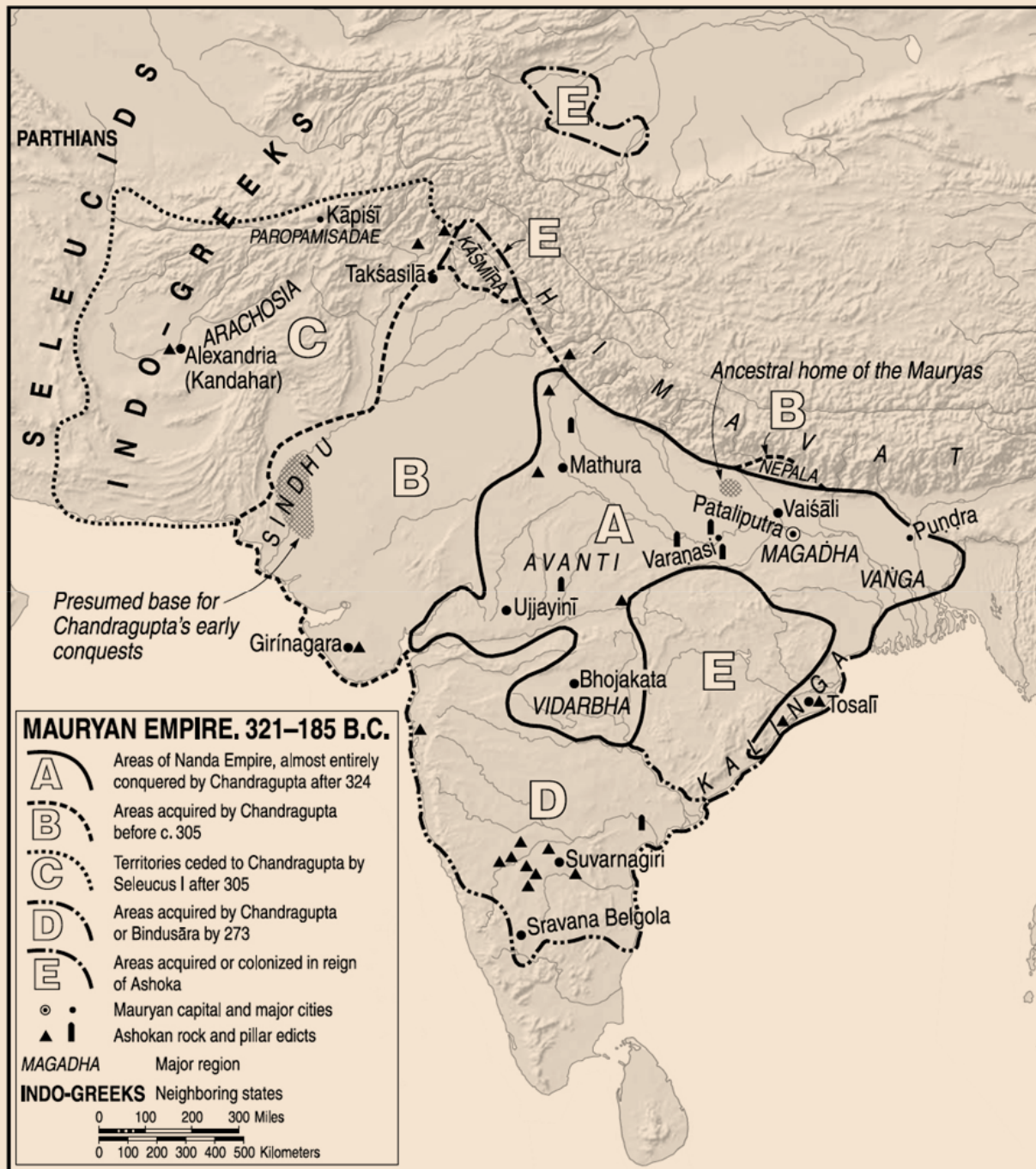


Asia at the time of Alexander the Great (323 BCE)



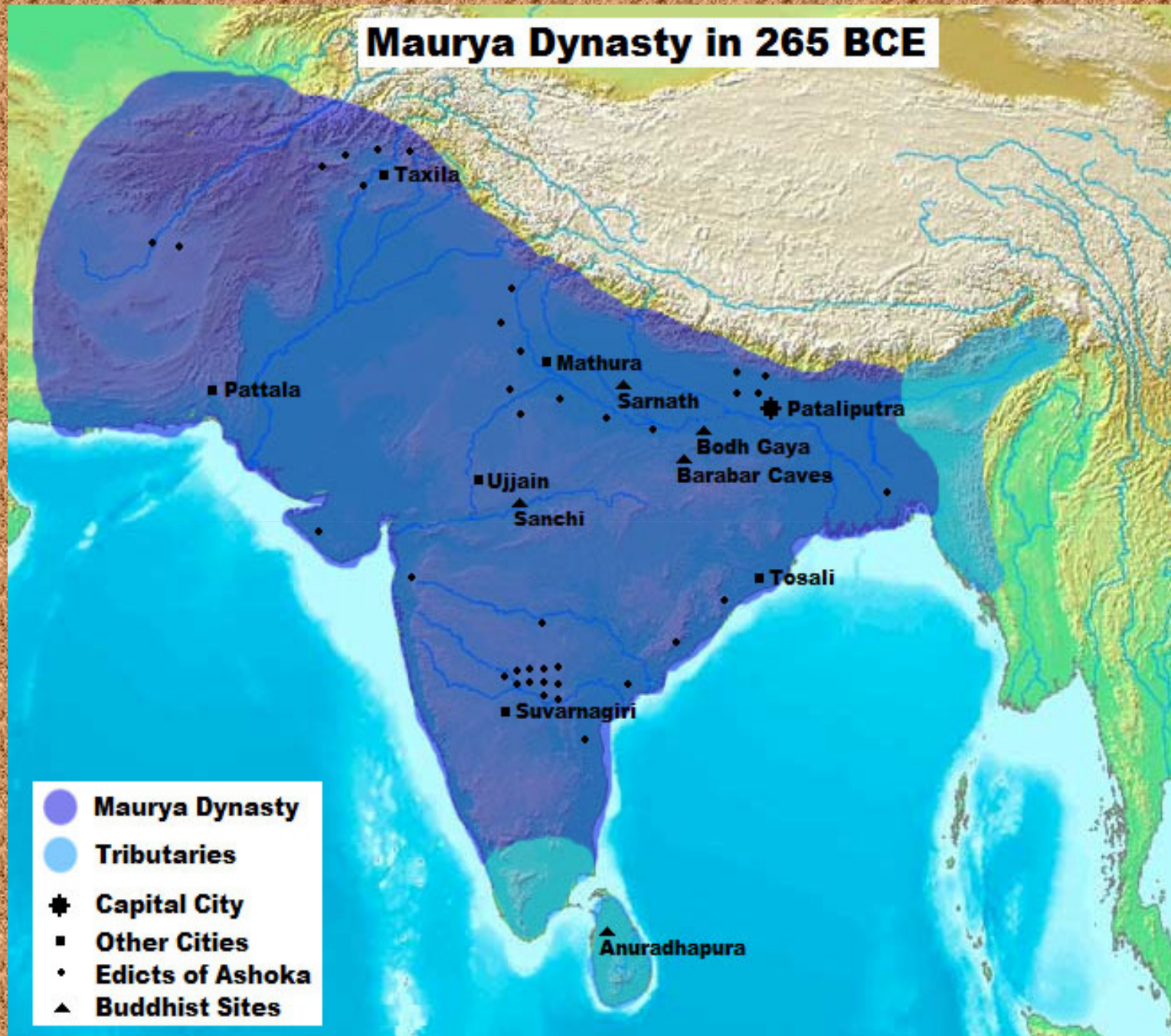
After conquering most of the Achaemenid Empire (326 BCE), Alexander decided not to wage war and to leave India.

The conquered territories were soon absorbed in the Mauryan Empire.



The Mauryan Empire, 321-185 BCE, founded by Chandragupta Maurya, with its capital city at Pataliputra (near modern Patna).

Maurya Dynasty in 265 BCE



**Ashoka as *chakravartin* =
“whose wheels are
moving”, but also the
wheel of *dharma*.
(From Amaravati, Musée Guimet,
Paris, courtesy Wikipedia)**

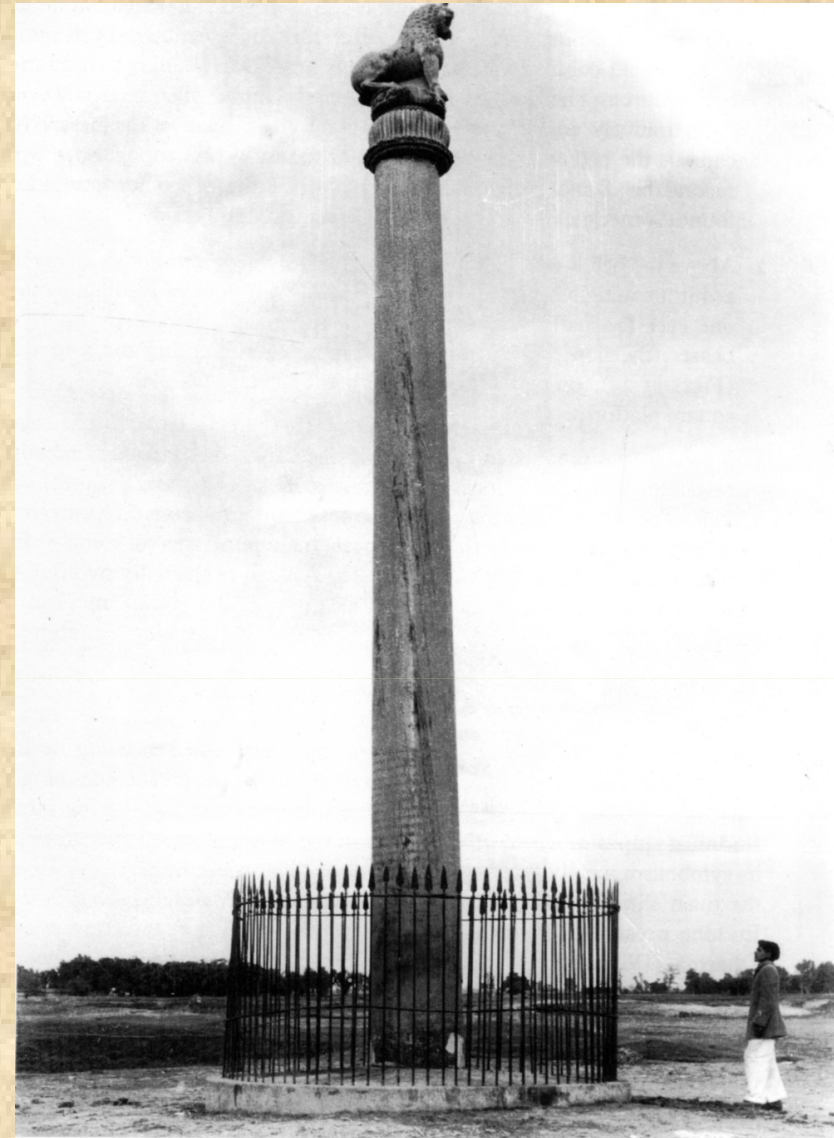




Rare Depictions of Ashoka, at the Buddhist site of Kanaganahalli (northern Karnataka), 1st century BCE onward.



The 33 Ashokan edicts, symbols of authority and just rule.



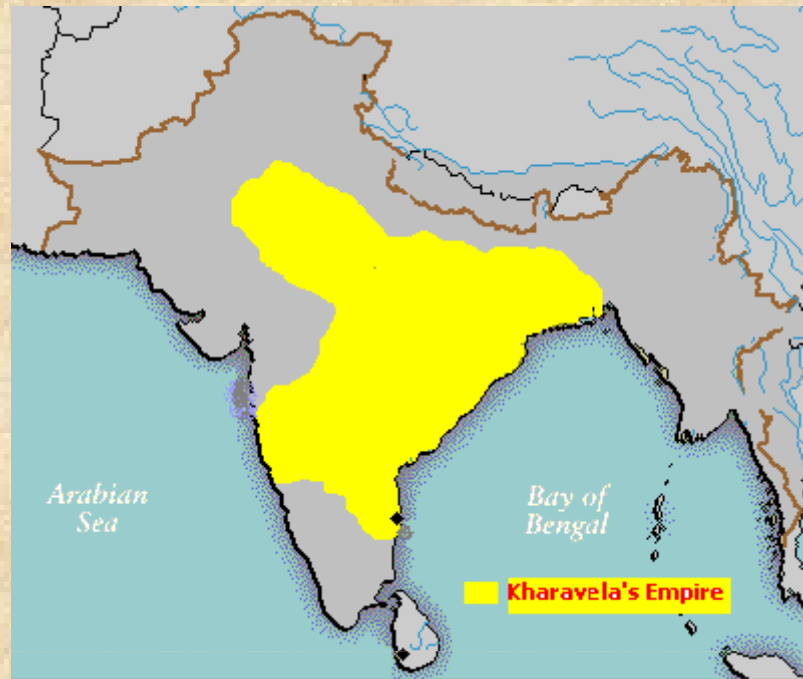
Ashokan pillar at Lauriya Nandangarh (Bihar)



The Shunga empire, established in 185 BCE, lasted till 73 BCE.



The Shatavahanas in central India and King Kharavela in eastern India (Kalinga) emerged in the 1st century BCE. The influence of the Ganges civilization has spread all the way to the South and Sri Lanka (then called Tamraparni).



Kharavela's empire around 180 BCE. The Hathigumpha inscription (Udayagiri Hills near Bhubaneswar) described this Jain king's military conquests.





The Kushan Empire, founded by Kushana invaders from central Asia / southern China in the 1st century CE.

The Kushans were soon “Indianized” and promoted Buddhism and its expansion to central Asia.

The Kushanas were possibly the first Indian kings to depict themselves through statues and on coins (perhaps under Greek influence).

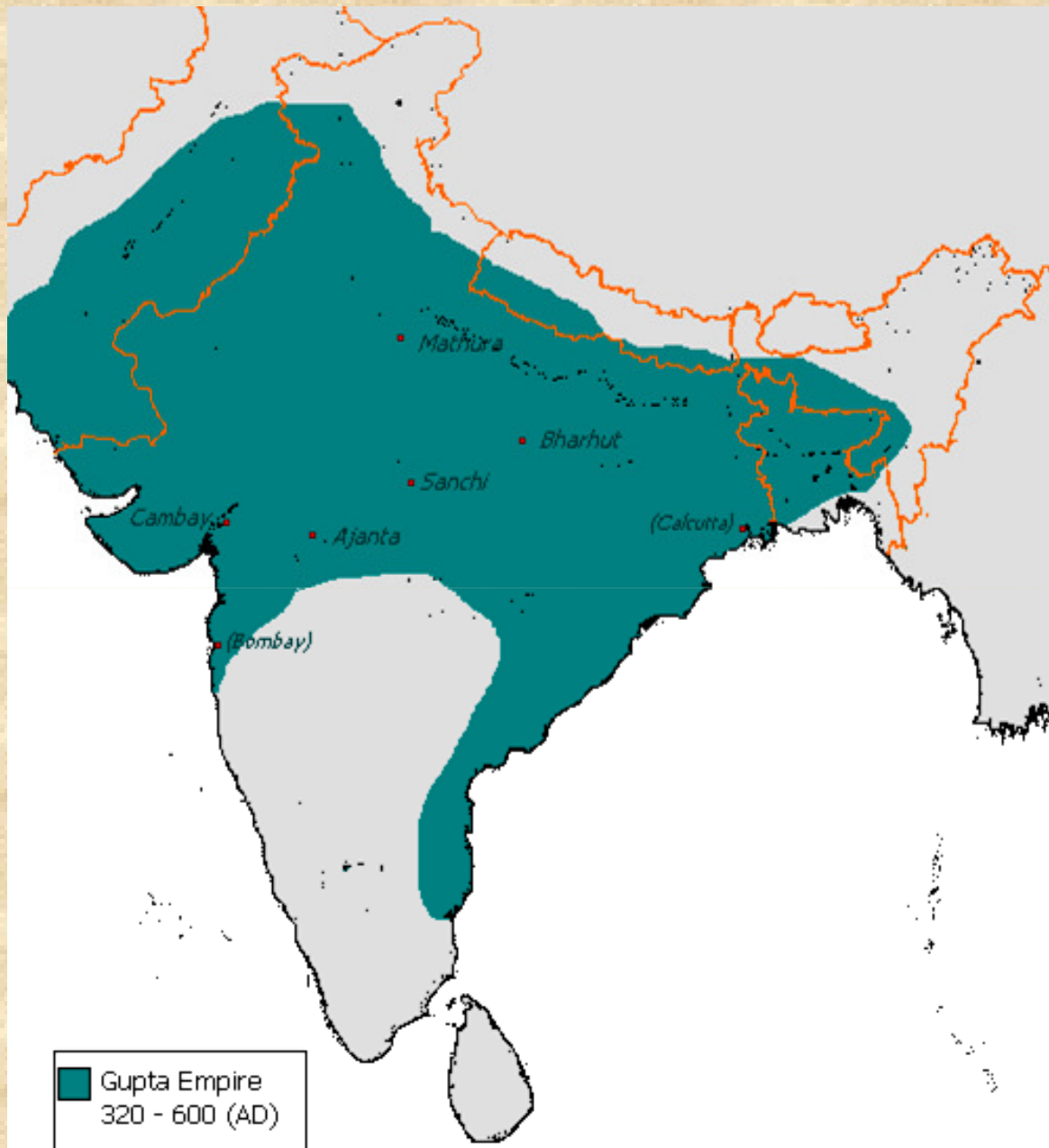


A headless statue of Kanishka, and a coin of his father, Wima Kadphises (reigned c. 110-20 CE)



Coins of Kanishka with the Greek god Helios on the reverse, and with the Buddha





**The Gupta Empire
was founded in
320 CE by
Chandragupta I
and lasted till
about 600 CE.**

Elements of the state in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*

Seven constituent elements (*saptānga*) for the state:

1. *Swāmi* = king
2. *Amātya* = ministers
3. *Janapada* = territory
4. *Durga* = fortified settlements
5. *Kosha* = treasury
6. *Daṇḍa* = military forces, police
7. *Mitra* = friends or allies

The king's duties in *Arthashastra*

“In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare his welfare; whatever pleases himself he shall not consider as good, but whatever pleases his subjects he shall consider as good.”

Ashoka's edict: “All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men.”

[The King to the army:] “I am a paid servant like yourselves; this country is to be enjoyed (by me) together with you.” (Concept of trusteeship)

“From his granary, the king should set apart one half for the people in the countryside in times of the distress, and use the other half. And he should replace old stock with new.” (2.15.22-23)

“Traders shall declare the quantity and price of the goods that have arrived at the foot of the flag before the city gate. ... If there is competition among buyers, the increase in price together with the duty shall go to the treasury. If the trader declares the quantity of the goods or the price to be less than it actually is, so as to lower the duty, the king shall confiscate the difference, or the trader shall pay eight times the duty. ...” (2.21.7-11)

Inscriptions: the ideal ruler

- **“Kings, haughty, irreligious, immodest and tyrannical were never regarded as divine beings.” (Mandsaur inscription of Yashodharman, M.P., 6th c. CE)**
- **“There came into existence the race of the Pallavas who followed the law of protection by which even the slightest sufferings of their subjects was removed.” (Velūrpālaiyam plates of Nandivarman III, 852 CE)**
- **The Pallava ruler Dantivarman is described as “ruling the earth according to dharma even in the Kali age”. (Bāhūr copper-plate inscription 877 CE)**
- **Aditya Chola I (9th c. CE) is described “one who was always bent upon removing evil, adhering himself to the path of the righteous and protecting the earth”. (Tiruvālangādu charter)**

From the *Mānasollāsa*, a 12th-century text on the duties and amusements of kings

“A king should avoid:

- **untruth**
- **treachery,**
- **illicit intercourse with women,**
- **eating what is forbidden,**
- **envy**
- **contact with outcastes.**

He should

- **revere all the gods,**
- **satisfy cows and**
- ***brāhmanas*,**
- **reverence his ancestors,**

- **feed his guests,**
- **obey his preceptors,**
- **practice penance,**
- **bathe in sacred waters,**
- **nourish the poor, and**
- **the orphan and widow,**
- **the afflicted,**
- **his kin,**
- **his servants,**
- **protect those who come to him for refuge.**

These are the twenty conditions of a successful reign.”

The ideal king according to Tiruvalluvar's *Kural*

- 384. He is a true king who sticks to virtue,
Removes evil, and is spotless in valour.**
- 385. He is a king who can do these—
Produce, acquire, conserve and dispense.**
- 386. That king is to be extolled
Who is easy of access and soft-spoken.**
- 549. For a king who would guard and cherish his people
To punish crimes is a duty, not defect.**
- 570. The earth bears no heavier burden
Than a tyrant hemmed in by fools.**
- 582. A king's job is to know in time
Everything that happens to everyone each day.**

“At most periods of her history India, though a cultural unit, has been torn by internecine war. In statecraft her rulers were cunning and unscrupulous. Famine, flood and plague visited her from time to time, and killed millions of her people. Inequality of birth was given religious sanction, and the lot of the humble was generally hard. Yet our overall impression is that in no other part of the ancient world were the relations of man and man, and of man and the state, so fair and humane. In no other early civilization were slaves so few in number, and in no other ancient lawbook are their rights so well protected as in the *Arthashastra*. No other ancient lawgiver proclaimed such noble ideals of fair play in battle as did Manu. In all her history of warfare, Hindu India has few tales to tell of cities put to the sword or of the massacre of non-combatants. The ghastly sadism of the kings of Assyria, who flayed their captives alive, is completely without parallel in ancient India. There was sporadic cruelty and oppression no doubt, but, in comparison with conditions in other early cultures, it was mild. To us the most striking feature of ancient Indian civilization is its humanity.”

— A.L. Basham