CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The vast Ganga plains may be divided roughly into three regions, viz., the upper Ganga plain, the middle Ganga plain, and the lower Ganga plain. The upper Ganga plain - the region east of the Sapta-Sindhava of early Aryan settlers - covered the ancient Kuru-Pāṇḍchāla country in the Yamuna-Ganga Doab. It had been a part of the Madhyadesā of the Epics - the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. The region differs markedly in physical features from the northern and the southern areas bordering it. The middle Ganga plain covers a part of the modern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar plains lying on either side of the Ganga and the Ghaghra. The eastern boundary of the upper Ganga plain marks the western limits of this region, while its eastern limit corresponds to the Bihar-Bengal boundary except the Kishanganj subdivision. It forms the central part of the Ganga plains as it imperceptibly opens up in the west from the upper Ganga plain and so invisibly dies out into the lower Ganga plain in the east. The lower Ganga plain includes a part of modern Bihar (the Kishanganj tehsil of the Purnea district) and almost the whole of Bengal (excluding the Purulia


2. See Baden Powell, The Indian Village Community, Delhi, 1972, p. 104 fn.
district and the mountaineous parts of Darjeeling). The region extends from the Himalayan foothills in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south, and from the edge of the Chotanagpur Highlands in the west to the border of Bangladesh and Assam in the east.¹ It formed a small part of the ancient Vaṅga territory of the Vedic literature and constituted a part of the Prachya region (eastern region) of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa.²

The climatic conditions of various parts of India - the foothills of the Himalayas, the Ganga plains, the Deccan plateau and the plains of Sindh and Rajputana - determined uneven stages of agricultural development in these areas. The fertile alluvial soil, abundant rainfall and considerable mineral deposits were some of the factors which helped an early and faster agrarian growth in the Ganga plains.³ The two main river systems, the Indus and the

¹. Though the whole of the lower Ganga plain is perceived as deltaic, the real delta constitutes about two-thirds of this plain, and 'is probably the largest delta in the world'. The deltaic setting, coupled with humid climate, was responsible for the crystallization of a way of life of the people distinct from the rest of the Great plains. See O.H.K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmonth, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*, London, 1967, p. 571.


³. K.M. Panikkar rightly points out that these plains formed the core of India from every point of view. See *Geographical Factors in Indian History*, Bombay, 1955, p. 25.
Ganga with their numerous tributaries and sub-tributaries, have always played a significant role in the agricultural development of the land. But, in many respects, the Ganga surpasses the Indus. It has been rightly observed that 'there is not a river in the world which has influenced humanity or contributed to the growth of material civilization to such an extent as the Ganges'.

The Himalayas send torrents of water caused by the rains and the melting of its snow-caps and glaciers to the Ganga plains almost throughout the year. As such, these plains are watered by a network of some perennial rivers. According to the Milinda Pañho, there were, in all, five hundred rivers flowing down from the Himalayas, of which ten are stated to be important. They are the Ganga, the Yamuna, the Aeiravati, the Sarabhu, the Māhi, the Sindhu, the Sarasvati, the Vetravati, the Vitamsa and the Chandabhāgā.

According to the Greek accounts, the Ganga has nineteen tributaries and sub-tributaries. In Kālidāsa’s literary works, we find references to the Yamuna, Śarayu, Sona, and the Indus.

3. J.W. McCrindle, Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian, Calcutta, 1877, pp. 63-64.
4. Raghu, VI, 48, 49; XIII, 57.
5. Ibid., VIII, 95; IX, 20; XIII, 63; XIX, 40.
6. Ibid., VII, 36.
Mahākosi, Mandākini, Tamasa, Sipra and Kapisā as tributaries of the Ganga. The network of these tributaries has made the Ganga plains the most fertile region. The contention of an economist that "the greater the fertility, the greater the incentive to skill" is amply borne out by the early economic history of the Ganga plains.

Although the archeological discoveries of the prehistoric and proto-historic periods have not been quite substantial, yet it is probable that the Ganga plains were occupied by man during the remote ancient period. Its

1. Kum., VI. 33.
2. Śāk., III. p. 859.
4. Ibid., p. IX. 20, 72.
5. Ibid., VI. 35.
6. Ibid., IV. 38.
7. The mighty river with its numerous tributaries and sub-tributaries 'has silently worked through the ages in an increasing process of regeneration of soil.... All the Gangetic basin is within the influence of the south-west monsoon rains, and the thick humid atmosphere of steamy effervescence, which is characteristic of lower Bengal and of those provinces to the south which are watered by the Mahānadi, makes all the land green with luxuriance of vegetation'. Imp. Gaz., I. p. 22. Also see Diod., II. 35-36.
earliest occupants were perhaps the Negritos, followed by the Proto-Australoids such as the Dravidians, the Nishādās, and others referred to as Dāsas. The location and geography of the area suggest a rich culture, at least not inferior, though it may be a little later in development, to the 'Harappa Culture'. Its population was by no means scanty, though it was probably localised and the settlements were separated by large stretches of uninhabited forests. The early occupants lived in villages and carried rudimentary agriculture in forest clearings. By the time of the arrival of the Aryans, the region appears to have had developed an organised agricultural society which 'knew how to form well-ordered villages, how to make forts and buildings, and how to prepare reservoirs and tanks for irrigation'. Thus, unlike the decayed or decaying civilization of the Indus valley, the Aryans found the non-Aryans in full blaze of civilization in the Ganga plains, where they advanced as much by alliances and voluntary submission of the inhabitants as by conquest.

2. Baden Powell, The Indian Village Community, p. 82.
The early Vedic hymns suggest that the Aryan settlements had not extended east of the Yamuna during the Rigvedic period. The effective eastward movement of the Aryans commenced later. In the Rigveda, there is only a casual reference to the region, only 'occasionally the Ganga and very rarely the Yamuna and the Sarayu (Ghaghara) are referred to, but not as being important. Neither the Kosala nor the Videha, so famous in the later Vedic literature, are mentioned in the Rigveda'.

The later Vedic period (c. 1000-600 B.C) witnessed the expansion of the Aryans from the plains of the Indus and its tributaries to the Ganga plains. The sandy and loamy soil of the upper Ganga plain and its thin vegetation did not present serious problems of clearance and settlement. The Satapatha Brāhmaṇa states how Videgha Māthava went on burning the forests till he reached the river Sadānirā in

1. R.R. Diwakar (ed.), Bihar Through the Ages, Bombay, 1959, p. 94. The early Aryan settlers had to fight tribes that followed them, with the help of the indigenous population which they had themselves subjugated and partly absorbed. Indra - the wielder of the Thunderbolt, the destroyer of the walled towns - is not on the side of the invaders but on the side of the Sudās and his allies, who fought decisively the battle of ten kings involving the Rigveda’s Panchajanaḥ, i.e., Anus Druhus, Purus, Turvasas, and Yadus and other five tribes, viz., Alina, Bhalanas, Pakthas, Visanis and Sivis. See K.M. Panikkar, Geographical Factors in Indian History, p. 92.

North Bihar. He cleared the jungle, reclaimed the marshes and established his kingdom. Whatever the truth behind the Vedic narrative, it appears that Videgha Māthava was the leader of the first immigrants to spread Aryan culture in that part of the Ganga plains, and so it was after him that the territory was known as Videha. That would suggest that the Aryan settlement took place beyond the Sadanlra (Gandak) in Videha towards the end of the Vedic period, before the Mahābhārata war. The expansion of the Aryans was marked by Aryanisation and absorption of the indigenous people, and their strain became thinner and thinner with every advance further. In the case of the Rigveda, the geographical

2. H.C. Raychaudhuri is of the opinion that this was the land referred to in the Mahābhārata as Jalodbhava (reclaimed from the swamp). See Political History of Ancient India, Calcutta, 1938, p. 55.
5. The Aitreyā Brāhmaṇa which is the most significant supplement to the Rigveda was, as is generally accepted, the work of a man who was the son of an Aryan Rishi by an indigenous woman—an offspring whom he refused to instruct in sacred knowledge. Even more significant is the fact that the arrangements of the Vedas into Samhitās was the work of Badarayana whose mother was an aboriginal. These instances clearly suggest the synthesis between the Aryans and the indigenous people in the Ganga plains. See K.M. Panikkar, Geographical Factors in Indian History, pp. 74-75.
The geographical focus is that on the *Sapta-Sindhava*, roughly from the Kabul river to the Sarasvati river. *Rigvedic* society was essentially a pre-urban society having a copper technology. But there was a gradual transformation from nomadic pastoralism dependent on cattle to an agrarian society with more settled communities. There was also a strong sense of tribal identity among the Aryans. The later *Vedic* literature depicts a recognizable change in material culture. Its geographical focus includes the Ganga plains in the main with a marginal familiarity with the Indus area, western and eastern India and the Vindhyas. The society depicted in that literature is essentially agrarian, and there is considerable evidence of acquaintance with iron technology also. The tribal identity continues, but in many cases it is extended to the territorial identity.

The later *Vedic* texts refer to such names as the Kurus, the Pāñchālas, the Vatsas, Kashis, Kosalas, Videhas, etc., of the Ganga plains, who were no longer the roving tribes, but had settled down and had become territorial powers. The river Sadānīrā formed the boundary between the Kosalas and the Videhas.

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The first Aryan settlements were established along the rivers. Forests were set on fire, and the use of fire as an effective means of reclaiming forest land for cultivation gave rise to the cult of fire (Agni) worship. The expanding colonies grew into Janapadas or kingdoms. The Kuru and the Pāñchāla were two major kingdoms that covered the upper Ganga plain. The Kurus first settled in the hinterland of Indraprastha, west of the Yamuna. Later on, they extended their territory across the Yamuna up to the Ganga in the east. The limits of the Kuru territory, as mentioned in the Purāṇas, extended from the Ghaghara to the Ganga bounded on the north and the south by dense forest belts. Indraprastha on the Yamuna and Hastinapur on the Ganga were the two capital cities.¹ The Pāñchālas, rivals of the Kurus, extended their sway over modern Rohilkhand, the central part of the Yamuna-Ganga Doab and northern-half of Ganga-Ghaghara Doab. Its northern division had its capital at Ahichhatra (Ramnagar in Bareilly), and its southern part was controlled from Kampila (Kampilya) on the Ganga in the Farrukhabad district.² The Ganga quite naturally formed the dividing line between the two Pāñchālas.

The upper Ganga plain became the nucleus for the Aryan expansion to the east. The process of eastward expansion,

² Ibid., p. 135.
however, was slow as the region was covered with thick forests. In the wake of Aryan colonization and cultural assimilation, the middle Ganga plain seems to have had developed a more advanced agrarian society, based mostly on the indigenous labour and technique.\(^1\) The Vedic fire cult was adopted for clearing the forests. Marshes were reclaimed and irrigation works were constructed. The Aryan decimal - territorial system was also superimposed on the existing frame; the society formed groups of ten, twenty, one hundred, and one thousand villages, which were looked after by Dasgrāmi, Pimstipa, Satgrāmi and Ādhipati, respectively.\(^2\) The lower Ganga plain was Aryanised in the post-Vedic period as the Vaṅga state appears to be the extreme eastern territory known to the Vedic Aryans.\(^3\)

As most parts of the Ganga plains were covered with natural forests, the agrarian expansion was not possible.


2. The middle Ganga plain formed the meeting ground of two of the pre-historic peoples, viz., the Mediterranean-Armenoid and Munda-speaking peoples. The fusion of two different races with different culture traits brought about remarkable material and cultural changes, that gave rise to diverse systems of rice and wheat-dominant crop-patterns. R.L. Singh, 'Evolution of Settlements in the Middle Ganga Valley', *NGJI*, Vol. I, 2.1955, p. 73.

without the clearance of these forests.\textsuperscript{1} It also needed permanent settlements, particularly in the middle Ganga alluvial plain which has a heavy rainfall, because, if left unattended, the land clearings would soon be covered with the growth of weeds.\textsuperscript{2} The familiarity with iron (\textit{krisṇaayās}), the dark metal, at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. greatly helped in bringing large areas under cultivation.\textsuperscript{3} In the upper Ganga plain, the use of iron tools began around 1000 B.C.\textsuperscript{4} Its immediate impact was the rapid clearing of forests. With the passage of time, the extraction of iron increased in volume, which helped in the diversification and generalization of its use. The availability of iron tools marked the turning point in the development of the agrarian economy. ‘Any peasant’ as Gorden Childe says, ‘could now afford an iron axe to clear fresh land for himself and iron ploughshare wherewith to break stony ground’.\textsuperscript{5} Iron tools assumed great importance -

\begin{enumerate}
\item Baud., 1.1 to 2.9 ; Vas., 1.8 ; \textit{Mahābhāṣya}, VIII. 1.4 ; Rām., \textit{Uterra Kānda}, ch. 81 ; \textit{Mbh.}, \textit{Sabha Parva}, 21.4 ; Also see G.Grierson, \textit{Notes on Gaya District}, Calcutta, 1893, pp. 3-4.
\item Romila Thapar, \textit{The Past and Prejudice}, p. 27.
\item Dilip Chakraborti, 'The Beginning of Iron in India', \textit{Antiquity}, Vol. 50, 1976, pp. 118-119.
\end{enumerate}
for clearing thick forests of the middle Ganga plain as also in reclaiming the marshy lands in the region. They were highly useful in felling the trees and removing their horizontal roots in order to make land fit for cultivation. The iron axe was of utmost use in this respect. Similarly, while the wooden ploughshare could be successfully used in turning the light loamy soil of the upper Ganga plain, the heavy soil of the middle Ganga plain could be broken only with an iron ploughshare. It appears that the plentiful source of iron in south Bihar was known to the people of the middle Ganga plain, for some artifacts of the North Black Polished (NBP) phase (c 500-100 B.C) from Banaras contain the same impurities as noticed in the iron ores of Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj. Improvement brought about in the quality of iron with the addition of carbon and the removal of slag has been referred to in some studies in the field of ancient Indian technology. The use of bellows helped in producing iron tools and implements in large quantities which, in turn, hastened the process of the clearance of forests in the Ganga plains. Our sources refer to the use of iron ploughshare in the area. Iron (lōha) in its various forms is mentioned more frequently, than copper (tamra) in the

3. Ibid., p. 159.
4. Pāṇini, IV. 1.42.
The lohadhyakṣa seems to have been the officer in charge of iron workshops.²

Among the sixteen Mahājanapadas of northern India in Buddha’s time, Kos-ala of Saket and Śrāvasti, Vatsa of Kaushāmbī, Magadha, and Aṅga were powerful kingdoms, while there were several confederacies such as the Vrijjjians of eight clans, i.e., the Lichhavis, the Jnatrikas, the Videhas, the Vrijjis, etc., the Mallas of Pawa (Padrauna) and Kausingara (Kushinagar) in the eastern and the Śākiyas in the northern Saryupar.¹ In the course of time, Magadha emerged as the most powerful state in the Ganga plains.⁴

1. Shamasāstry, however, translated the word lōha as ‘metals’ and lohadhyakṣa as the superintendent of metals. See Arthasastra (tr.) p. 86.
4. The success of Magadha was due, among other factors, to its being out of the pale of orthodox Brāhmaṇism. While the lands of earlier Aryan occupation, such as Kuru-Pāñchāla territory, seem to have had become priest-ridden squandering much of the national wealth in expensive sacrifices, this was not the case with Magadha, which was an early home of Buddhism and Jainism, which encouraged a somewhat more positive and realistic approach to life than did the sterile sacrificial Brāhmaṇism of the regions further west. For other factors responsible for the rise of Magadha
Pātaliputra, the Magadhan capital, became the political centre indicating the growing strength and confidence of Magadha and the growing importance of the Ganga, both for trade and politics.\(^1\) Throughout this period, expanding agriculture formed the mainstay of both the people and the State. The Mauryas built up a highly organised administration and did much for agricultural development. Land was properly utilised, irrigation and other facilities were extended to the peasants and agriculture flourished. The expansion of the agrarian village economy, in turn, greatly helped in the establishment and consolidation of the Maurya State. The State had to be maintained through revenue and taxes which were easier to collect on a regular basis in the agrarian economy. With the decline of the Mauryas, political uncertainty prevailed for many centuries in the Ganga plains. After the interlude of the Śunga, Kanva and other weaker dynasties, the Kushāṇa established their power for some time in northern India and extended their rule to the middle Ganga plain.\(^2\) But it was under

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\begin{enumerate}
\item M.S. Pandey, The Historical Geography and Topography of Bihar, p. 15.
\item See R.S. Sharma, 'Decay of Gangetic Towns in Gupta and Post-Gupta Times', Proc. IHC., Muzaffarpur, 1972, p. 101. The archaeological excavations have brought to light a number of Kushāṇa sites in Bihar. They include
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the Guptas that the area was once again politically unified in the fourth century A.D., and it was ruled from Pāṭaliputra for about two centuries. The empire was divided into bhuktis and desas for administrative purposes. With the downfall of the Imperial Guptas in the second half of the sixth century A.D., the struggle for power started among their feudatories. In the process, the Maukharis succeeded in establishing their supremacy that lasted to the end of the sixth century A.D. In the beginning of the seventh century A.D., political power passed into the hands of the Vardhanas and Harsha ruled over the area for about forty years. His kingdom, however, was not a closely connected empire of the Mauryan variety. Thereafter, the area was mostly appended either to the Bengal powers or remained divided into small warring powers till the advent of the Muslims on the political scene.


1. S.R. Goyal has tried to prove that the Guptas first established their political power in the eastern Uttar Pradesh with Prayaga as its centre. See A *History of the Imperial Guptas*, Allahabad, 1967, p. 53.

2. Notable among the bhuktis in the middle Ganga plain were the Tirabhukti (Tirhut) north of the Ganga, Srinagar bhukti (Patna, Shahabad and South Monghyr), and Magadha-bhukti (Rajgir and Gaya). See R.R. Diwakar (ed.), *Bihar Through the Ages*, p. 276.