Around the sixth century BCE, several cities and states emerged in a belt stretching from Gandhara in the north-west to Anga in eastern India, extending into central India and the Deccan. Buddhist canonical texts in Pali, like the Anguttaranikaya, enlist 16 powerful states, the solasa-mahajanapadas

In the Middle Ganga Valley

1) Anga

Anga roughly corresponds to present day Bhagalpur and Monghyr districts of eastern Bihar. Located at the confluence of the Ganga and Champa rivers, its capital city of Champa is identified with modern day Champanagara or Champapura village near Bhagalpur. One of the greatest cities of the sixth century BCE, the capital city of Champa was an important commercial centre located on the trade routes of the time. Excavations at Champa have revealed the city being surrounded by defensive fortifications including a moat. Travel accounts often describe merchants as sailing overseas from Champa to Suvarnabhumi (a possible reference to Southeast Asia).

2) Magadha

The kingdom of Magadha was to become the foremost political entity by the 4th century BCE. The kingdom roughly covered the areas of modern day Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar. It was bound by the Ganga, Son and Champa rivers on the north, west, and east respectively and the Vindhyan range on the south. Its first capital was Girivraja or Rajagriha, modern Rajgir. This city was closely associated with the lives of the Buddha as well as Mahavira. However later, its capital shifted to Pataliputra, often associated with modern Patna. Excavations at Rajagriha have revealed a number of defense structures like stone fortification walls dating to about the times of Bimbisara and Ajatashatru, i.e., the 6th-5th centuries BCE.

3) Vajji/Vrijji Confederacy

The Vrijji ganasangha was in eastern India, north of the Ganga with its capital at Vaishali. It has been identified with the area of Basadh, near Muzaffarpur area in Bihar. The Vrijji confederacy is counted as one among the most prominent mahajanapadas during the age of the Buddha. Magadha under the king Bimbisara also established marriage alliances with the Vrijji ganasangha. Most historians consider the Vrijjis/Vajjis as a confederacy of eight or nine clans. This means that in this confederacy the clans maintained an equal, and independent status, thus closely preserving their own identity even within the confederation. While ganasanghas, especially the Vrijjis, have often been described in Buddhist and Jaina texts as kshatriya clans; this should not lead us to presume that they observed a varna society. They retained more of the clan tradition than did the kingdoms. They governed through an assembly representing the clan, even if the assembly was restricted to the heads of clans or families.

4) Mallas

The Mallas, located further west to the Vajjis, were a confederacy of nine clans. There were two main political centres within this principality Kusinara and the capital Pava. Kusinara has been identified with Kasia, Janapadas and Mahajanapadas about 77 km east of Gorakhpur. While some historians identify Pava with modern day Pawapuri in Bihar, yet others identify it with Padaraona village about 26 km north-east of Kasia. The Mallas were close allies of the Vajjis. However, there were occasional conflicts between them as well.

To their West

5) Kashi

One of the earliest mahajanapadas to gain political prominence was the kingdom of Kashi. It was bound by the Varuna river in the north and the Asi

river in the south. It is from these two rivers that its capital city Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganga, got its name. The Jatakas refer to a long-standing rivalry between the kingdoms of Kashi and Kosala. Eventually under the reign of Kosalan king Prasenajit (Pasenadi in Pali), the feud ended with Kashi getting absorbed into the Kosalan kingdom. Kashi today is identified with the area adjoining Benaras in Uttar Pradesh.

6) Kosala

The powerful kingdom of Kosala was bound by the Sadanira (modern day Gandak) on the east and the Gomati on the west, the Sarpika or Syandika (Sai) on the south, and the Nepal hills to the north. The capital of north Kosala was Shravasti, identified with the modern-day twin villages of SahetMahet, and the capital of south Kosala was Kushavati. Maheth was a city and Saheth has been identified as the site of the ancient monastery of Jetavana. According to the Buddhist tradition, Jetavana was gifted by the lay devotee Anathapindika to the Buddhist sangha. Saket and Ayodhya were the other two important centres within the kingdom. Pasenadi (also known as Prasenajit) was an immensely popular ruler of Kosala, and a contemporary of the Buddha. Kosala today can be identified with the areas of Lucknow, Gonda, Faizabad, Baharaich of Uttar Pradesh.

7) Vatsa

Vatsa or Vamsa was a kingdom known for its fine cotton textiles. Its capital was situated at Kaushambi, near modern Prayagaraj. Kausambi was an important point on the trade routes connecting the Deccan, the Ganga valley and the north-west. Excavations here have revealed imposing defense structures dating to about the 600 BCE. Vatsa was a powerful mahajanapada under the leadership of the famous king Udayana. Around the same time, king Pradyota was ruling Avanti. The rivalry between the two is the subject

of many legends. In fact king Udayana featured as the protagonist of at least three Sanskrit dramas from later periods – the Svapna-Vasavadatta of Bhasa and the Ratnavali and Priyadarshika of Harsha.

Further West

8) Kuru

The Kurus were settled in the modern day Ganga-Yamuna Doab region. According to the Buddhist tradition, the Kuru kingdom was ruled by kings belonging to the Yuddhitthila gotta (gotra), i.e., the family of Yudhishthira, with their capital at Imdapatta (Indraprastha). In the Epics, the Kuru capital was located at Hastinapura till a flood led to its being shifted to Kaushambi

The Jaina text, Uttaradhyayana Sutra refers to a Kuru king named Isukara who ruled from the town of Isukara. The Kurus up to the time of the Buddha were a monarchy. Subsequently they become a ganasangha. We also know that they established matrimonial relations with the Yadavas, Bhojas, and Panchalas.

9) Panchala

The Panchala mahajanapada included the present day Rohilkhand area and was divided into two parts by the river Ganga. The kingdom also had two capitals – the capital of Uttara (north) Panchala was Ahichchhatra, (identified with modern Ramnagar in Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh) (Figure 13.1) and the capital of Dakshina (south) Panchala was Kampilya, (identified with Kampil in Farukkhabad district, UP). According to the Arthashastra, the Panchalas were initially a monarchical state and later switched to a non-monarchical form of government. The mahajanapada had important urban centres, such as Kanyakubja or Kanauj.

10) Matsya

The Matsyas were situated near the eastern parts of present day Rajasthan, comprising of areas in and around Jaipur, Alwar and Bharatpur. Their capital was Viratnagara (modern Vairat), named after the founder of the kingdom, king Virata. Buddhist texts usually associate the Matsyas with Surasenas.

11) Surasena

The Surasenas were also located in the Yamuna doab region, with their capital at Mathura. According to the Buddhist tradition, one Surasena king, Avantiputra was a Buddhist disciple. His very name (literally meaning ‘son of Avanti’) hints at a matrimonial alliance between the Surasenas and Avanti. Like many other political centres, Mathura too was an important junction on the trade routes, connecting the north to the Deccan as well as to the western coast.

12) Gandhara

The kingdom of Gandhara comprised modern day Peshawar and Rawalpindi districts in Pakistan. Its capital, Takshasila or Taxila was a major centre of trade and learning. Excavations at Taxila have revealed three major settlements — the Bhir mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh. The Bhir mound represents the oldest city. In the earliest levels of Bhir mound, silver punchmarked bar coins and other coin types have been found. Around the sixth century BCE, Gandhara was being ruled by king Pukkusati or Pushkarasarin, who successfully waged a war against Avanti. He also maintained cordial relations with Magadha.

13) Kamboja (in the Hazara district of Pakistan)

Closely associated with Gandhara was the kingdom of Kamboja. Kamboja included the present day area of Rajaori, which is in the Hazara district of

Pakistan. The Kambojas were a monarchy till about the 6th century BCE, but the later text Arthashastra refers to them as a ganasangha.

In the Central and Deccan regions

14) Avanti

The mahajanapada of Avanti was located in the Malwa region of central India. Avanti had two capitals, one at Ujjayini (near modern Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh) and the other at Mahishmati (identified with modern day Mandhata in the western part of Madhya Pradesh). Both the cities were important centres on the trade routes that connected north India with the Deccan and also with the ports on the western coast. Avanti was well known for its famous king Pradyota, under whose reign Avanti entered into military conflicts with Vatsa, Magadha, and Kosala.

15) Chedi (capital Suktimati, located in the area around present-day Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh). The Chedi kingdom was situated in the eastern part of Bundelkhand in central India. Scholars have identified its capital Sotthivatinagara with the Shuktimati or Shuktisahvaya of the Mahabharata. The ancient cities of Tripuri in the Narmada valley near Jabalpur, and the Airakina (Eran) near Sagar were also probably part of the Chedi kingdom.

16) Assaka, or Asmaka (capital Govardhana, near Nander in the Godavari valley in Maharashtra). The kingdom of Assaka finds mention in a range of texts such as Panini’s Ashtadhyayi, the Markandeya Purana, the Brihatsamhita. Buddhist texts locate Assaka along the Godavari river in Maharashtra. Its capital was Potana/Podana, and is identified with modern Bodhan. The Jatakas suggest that Assaka at some point had come under the sway of Kashi, and that it achieved military victory over Kalinga in eastern India.