Chapter 2: Kings, Farmers and Towns

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Discuss the evidence of craft production in Early Historic cities. In what ways is this different from the evidence from Harappan cities?

Early Historic cities yield varied evidence of craft production. A wide range of artefacts has been recovered from urban sites — fine pottery known as Northern Black Polished Ware (probably used by the rich), and ornaments, tools, weapons, vessels and figurines made of gold, silver, copper, bronze, ivory, glass, shell and terracotta. Craftspersons likely used iron tools to meet the demands of urban elites. Crucially, written sources add to this picture: from the second century BCE, short votive inscriptions name donors and sometimes their occupations — washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths and blacksmiths. Guilds (shrenis) of craft producers and merchants are also mentioned; they probably procured raw materials, regulated production and marketed goods. The key difference is that Harappan craft production is known almost entirely from archaeology, since the Harappan script is undeciphered, whereas for Early Historic cities inscriptions directly name craftspersons and their organisations. However, extensive excavation of these sites is difficult because people still live in them, unlike the abandoned Harappan cities.

Q2 Describe the salient features of mahajanapadas.

Early Buddhist and Jaina texts mention sixteen states called mahajanapadas. Although the lists vary, names such as Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara and Avanti occur frequently. Most mahajanapadas were ruled by kings, but some — known as ganas or sanghas — were oligarchies in which power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called rajas; both Mahavira and the Buddha belonged to such ganas, and in cases like the Vajji sangha the rajas probably controlled resources such as land collectively. Some of these states lasted nearly a thousand years. Each mahajanapada had a capital city, which was usually fortified. Maintaining these forts, along with incipient armies and bureaucracies, required resources. From the sixth century BCE, Brahmanas composed the Sanskrit Dharmasutras, which laid down norms for rulers — ideally Kshatriyas — who were advised to collect taxes and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans; raids on neighbouring states were also recognised as a legitimate way of acquiring wealth. Some states built standing armies and regular bureaucracies, while others depended on militia recruited from the peasantry.

Q3 How do historians reconstruct the lives of ordinary people?

Ordinary people rarely left accounts of their own thoughts and experiences, and inscriptions, which focus on kings and grand events, do not provide all the answers. Historians therefore draw on a range of indirect sources. They examine stories in anthologies such as the Jatakas and the Panchatantra — many of which began as popular oral tales and were later written down (the Jatakas in Pali around the middle of the first millennium CE). The Gandatindu Jataka, for instance, describes the plight of a wicked king's subjects — old women and men, cultivators, herders and village boys — who were harassed by robbers at night and tax collectors by day and fled to the forest. Votive inscriptions that record donors' occupations reveal townspeople like weavers, potters and goldsmiths. Buddhist stories mention landless labourers, small peasants and large landholders (gahapatis), while early Tamil Sangam texts name vellalar (large landowners), uzhavar (ploughmen) and adimai (slaves). Texts like the Harshacharita even describe life in a small forest-edge village. By carefully reading such sources, historians reconstruct the lives and differentiation of ordinary people.

Q4 Compare and contrast the list of things given to the Pandyan chief (Source 3) with those produced in the village of Danguna (Source 8). Do you notice any similarities or differences?

Source 3, from the Tamil epic Silappadikaram, lists gifts brought to the Pandyan chief Senguttuvan by people who came down the mountain: ivory, fragrant wood, deer-hair fans, honey, sandalwood, red ochre, antimony, turmeric, cardamom and pepper, along with coconuts, mangoes, medicinal plants, fruits, onions, sugarcane, flowers, areca nut, bananas and a host of animals and birds such as tigers, lions, elephants, monkeys, bears, deer, peacocks and parrots. Source 8, Prabhavati Gupta's inscription about the village of Danguna, refers instead to produce and dues linked to the land grant — grass, animal hides, charcoal, fermenting liquors, salt, mines, khadira trees, flowers, milk, and hidden treasures and taxes. Similarity: both lists feature natural and forest produce such as flowers, animal products and plants, and both represent resources that rulers or chiefs could claim. Differences: Source 3 shows a wide range of exotic forest and animal items brought voluntarily as gifts to a chief (chiefs received gifts rather than collecting taxes), whereas Source 8 lists the agricultural produce, obligations and exemptions attached to an agrahara land grant made by a ruling family — resources tied to a settled village and its dues to the state.

Q5 List some of the problems faced by epigraphists.

Epigraphists face several problems. There are technical limitations: letters are sometimes very faintly engraved, so reconstructions remain uncertain, and inscriptions may be damaged or have letters missing. It is not always easy to establish the exact meaning of the words used, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time, so scholars constantly debate alternative readings. Although several thousand inscriptions have been discovered, not all have been deciphered, published and translated; and many more inscriptions that once existed have not survived the ravages of time, so what is available is probably only a fraction of what was inscribed. A more fundamental problem is that not everything politically or economically significant was recorded — routine agricultural practices and the joys and sorrows of daily life find little mention, since inscriptions focus on grand, unique events. Moreover, the content almost always projects the perspective of the person who commissioned the inscription, so epigraphists must assess whether statements are true, plausible or exaggerated, and juxtapose inscriptions with other sources.

Q6 Discuss the main features of Mauryan administration. Which of these elements are evident in the Asokan inscriptions that you have studied?

Historians reconstruct Mauryan administration from archaeological finds, the fragmentary account of the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, the Arthashastra (parts probably composed by Kautilya), and above all the inscriptions of Asoka.

The empire had five major political centres — the capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri. Administrative control was probably strongest around these carefully chosen centres: Taxila and Ujjayini lay on important long-distance trade routes, while Suvarnagiri (the 'golden mountain') was likely important for tapping the gold mines of Karnataka. Because the regions within the empire were so diverse, historians doubt that a single uniform administrative system operated everywhere.

Communication along land and riverine routes was vital, and the army ensured protection for those on the move. According to Megasthenes, a committee with six subcommittees coordinated military activity — looking after the navy, transport and provisions, foot-soldiers, horses, chariots and elephants. Officials also superintended rivers, measured land, inspected canals and sluices, collected taxes and supervised occupational groups such as woodcutters, carpenters, blacksmiths and miners. Asoka additionally tried to hold the empire together by propagating dhamma — respect for elders, generosity to Brahmanas and renouncers, kind treatment of slaves and servants, and respect for other religions — and appointed special officers called dhamma mahamattas to spread this message.

Several of these features are evident in Asokan inscriptions. The five political centres are all named in his inscriptions. The ideals of dhamma and the dhamma mahamattas are proclaimed in them. The arrangements for governance appear too: in one inscription Asoka says that earlier rulers had no system to receive regular reports, so he appointed pativedakas (reporters) to inform him about the people's affairs at all times and places. Thus the inscriptions reflect the centres of

power, the emphasis on reporting and administration, and above all the ideology of dhamma.

Q7 This is a statement made by one of the best-known epigraphists of the twentieth century, D.C. Sircar: “There is no aspect of life, culture and activities of the Indians that is not reflected in inscriptions.” Discuss.

D.C. Sircar's statement captures the extraordinary range of what inscriptions can reveal, but it is also an overstatement, as the chapter itself makes clear.

Inscriptions are writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone, metal or pottery, usually recording the achievements, activities or ideas of those who commissioned them — the exploits of kings, or donations made by women and men to religious institutions. They illuminate many aspects of early Indian life. Political history was reconstructed from them once James Prinsep deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi and identified the king Piyadassi as Asoka. Administration and ideology appear in the Asokan edicts, with their five political centres, pativedakas and the message of dhamma. Economic life is visible in land grants such as Prabhavati Gupta's grant of the village of Danguna, with its dues and agrahara exemptions, and in the Sudarshana lake inscription recording how Rudradaman and later a Gupta ruler repaired the reservoir. Society and crafts emerge from votive inscriptions that name donors' occupations and mention guilds. Notions of kingship are reflected in prashastis like the Prayaga Prashasti, which praises Samudragupta as equal to the gods. In this sense inscriptions do reflect politics, economy, religion, society and culture.

Yet there are important limits. Routine agricultural practices and the ordinary joys and sorrows of daily life find no mention, because inscriptions focus on grand, unique events. Their content almost invariably projects the perspective of the person who commissioned them, so they must be juxtaposed with other sources. Many inscriptions have not survived, and not all that survive have been deciphered or translated; letters may be faint, damaged or ambiguous. Ordinary people rarely feature. So while inscriptions reflect a remarkable breadth of Indian life, they do not reflect every aspect; Sircar's claim is true in spirit but needs qualification, since epigraphy alone cannot provide a full understanding of the past.

Q8 Discuss the notions of kingship that developed in the post-Mauryan period.

After the decline of the Mauryan Empire, by the second century BCE new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged across the subcontinent, and with them developed new notions of kingship.

In the Deccan and the south, the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam proved stable and prosperous. A chief derived support from his kinfolk, performed special rituals, led in warfare and arbitrated disputes; unlike kings who collected taxes, he received gifts from subordinates and distributed them among his supporters, as the Silappadikaram shows for the chief Senguttuvan. Other rulers, such as the Satavahanas of western and central India and the Shakas of Central Asian origin, derived revenue from long-distance trade; though their social origins were often obscure, once in power they tried to claim social status in various ways.

A major strategy was to claim divine or semi-divine status. The Kushanas best exemplify this: colossal statues of their rulers were installed in shrines at Mat near Mathura and in Afghanistan, which some historians read as a claim to be godlike, and many Kushana kings adopted the title devaputra, or 'son of god', possibly inspired by Chinese rulers who called themselves sons of heaven. Their coins and sculpture projected these notions of kingship.

By the fourth century, larger states such as the Gupta Empire arose. Many depended on samantas — men who maintained themselves through local resources and control over land, offering homage and military support; powerful samantas could become kings, while weak rulers could be reduced to subordination. Gupta kingship was glorified through prashastis composed by court poets, the best example being Harishena's Prayaga Prashasti, which praises Samudragupta as without an antagonist on earth, as the Supreme Being (Purusha), and as equal to the gods Kubera, Varuna, Indra and Yama. Thus post-Mauryan kingship increasingly rested on claims of divinity and high status, advertised through coins, sculpture and inscriptions.

Q9 To what extent were agricultural practices transformed in the period under consideration?

Agricultural practices were transformed significantly in this period, but the change was uneven across regions and social groups.

As the demand for taxes grew, several strategies were adopted to increase production. One was the shift to plough agriculture, which spread in fertile alluvial river valleys such as those of the Ganga and the Kaveri from about the sixth century BCE; the iron-tipped ploughshare was used to turn the alluvial soil in areas of high rainfall. In parts of the Ganga valley, paddy production was dramatically increased by the introduction of transplantation, though this meant back-breaking work for the producer. Another strategy was irrigation through wells and tanks, and less commonly canals, organised by communities as well as by individuals — often powerful men including kings, who recorded such works in inscriptions, as with the Sudarshana lake.

Yet the transformation was limited. The iron ploughshare was not adopted everywhere: cultivators in semi-arid regions such as parts of Punjab and Rajasthan did not use it until the twentieth century, and people in the hilly tracts of the north-east and central subcontinent practised hoe agriculture, which suited their terrain better. The benefits of the new technologies were very uneven, leading to growing differentiation in rural society — landless agricultural labourers, small peasants and large landholders (gahapatis), with village headmen and big landowners emerging as powerful figures. Early Tamil texts similarly distinguish vellalar, uzhavar and adimai. Land grants, recorded on stone and copper plates, extended agriculture to new areas and created new rural elites. So agricultural practices were genuinely transformed through ploughing, transplantation, irrigation and land grants, but the extent varied greatly by region, terrain and access to land, labour and technology.

Q10 Compare Maps 1 and 2, and list the mahajanapadas that might have been included in the Mauryan Empire. Are any Asokan inscriptions found in these areas?

On an outline map, work with the two maps given in the chapter. Map 1 shows the early states and their capitals — mahajanapadas such as Gandhara (Taxila), Kamboja, Kuru, Panchala, Matsya, Shurasena (Mathura), Koshala (Shravasti), Kashi (Varanasi), Vatsa (Kaushambi), Malla, Vajji (Vaishali), Magadha (Rajgir), Anga (Champa), Avanti (Ujjayini), Chedi, Ashmaka and Vanga. Map 2 shows the distribution of Asokan inscriptions. Mark the mahajanapadas whose territories overlap with the sites on Map 2 — for example Gandhara (near Taxila, Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra), Magadha (near Pataliputra and Sahasram), Avanti (Ujjayini), and the Kashi–Koshala region — as the ones likely included in the Mauryan Empire. Yes: Asokan inscriptions are indeed found in these areas, since sites such as Taxila, Ujjayini and Pataliputra named on Map 2 fall within these mahajanapada regions. Only name and mark the sites given in the chapter's maps; do not add others.

Q11 Collect newspapers for one month. Cut and paste all the statements made by government officials about public works. Note what the reports say about the resources required for such projects, how the resources are mobilised and the objective of the project. Who issues these statements, and how and why are they communicated? Compare and contrast these with the evidence from inscriptions discussed in this chapter. What are the similarities and differences that you notice?

This is a project. Over a month, collect newspaper reports of official statements about public works (roads, irrigation, buildings) and note, in each, the resources needed, how they are mobilised, the stated objective, who issues the statement and how and why it is communicated. Then compare these with inscriptional evidence in the chapter — for instance the Sudarshana lake inscription, in which Rudradaman claims to have repaired the reservoir from his own resources without taxing his subjects, and land-grant inscriptions recording state dues and exemptions. Draw out similarities (rulers and governments both publicise works, resource mobilisation and the ruler's benevolence) and differences (modern statements use mass media for a literate public, whereas inscriptions were engraved on stone or metal, projected the commissioner's own perspective, and reached mostly a limited audience).

Q12 Collect five different kinds of currency notes and coins in circulation today. For each one of these, describe what you see on the obverse and the reverse (the front and the back). Prepare a report on the common features as well as the differences in terms of pictures, scripts and languages, size, shape and any other element that you find significant. Compare these with the coins shown in this chapter, discussing the materials used, the techniques of minting, the visual symbols and their significance and the possible functions that coins may have had.

This is a project. Collect five different present-day notes and coins and, for each, describe the obverse and reverse — the pictures, scripts and languages, size, shape and any other notable element — then report on their common features and differences. Next, compare them with the coins shown in the chapter: the earliest punch-marked coins of silver and copper (symbols punched onto the metal), the Indo-Greek coins that first bore rulers' names and images, the Kushana gold coins carrying a king and a deity, the Yaudheya copper coins of a tribal republic, and the pure gold coins of the Gupta rulers. In your comparison, discuss the materials used, the techniques of minting, the visual symbols and their significance (such as rulers and deities), and the possible functions coins served — facilitating trade and exchange and asserting the authority of the issuing kings.