Chapter 4: New Beginnings: Cities and States

Questions — Questions and Activities

Q1 Consider the quotation at the start of the chapter and discuss in several groups. Compare your observations and conclusions on what Kauṭilya recommends for a kingdom. Is it very different today?

SOLUTION

Kauṭilya, in the Arthaśhāstra, lists several key recommendations for a kingdom:

1. Security — the capital and frontier towns must be fortified.
2. Self-sufficiency — the land must be able to sustain its own population and outsiders in times of calamity.
3. Natural resources — the kingdom should have cultivable land, mines, timber forests, elephant forests, and good cattle pastures.
4. Water security — it should not depend only on rain; reliable water sources are essential.
5. Connectivity — good roads and waterways are necessary.
6. Economic productivity — a wide variety of commodities should be produced and available.

Comparison with today:

Most of these principles still guide modern states. Governments today invest in national security (defence, border management), food security (agriculture and public distribution), natural resource management (forests, water, minerals), infrastructure (roads, ports, airports), and a diversified economy. The emphasis on not depending solely on rain echoes today's focus on irrigation, dams, and water management.

The main difference is that modern states also prioritise education, healthcare, social welfare, environmental protection, and democratic rights — areas not mentioned by Kauṭilya. His vision was primarily focused on the ruler's practical power, whereas modern governance places citizens' rights and well-being at the centre.

Overall, Kauṭilya's recommendations are remarkably relevant even after 2,000 years, though the scope and values of governance have expanded considerably.

Answer: Kauṭilya recommends fortification, self-sufficiency, natural resources, water security, good roads, and a productive economy. Most of these principles still guide modern states; the key difference is that modern governance also prioritises education, healthcare, social welfare, and citizens' rights.

Q2 According to the text, how were rulers chosen in early Vedic society?

SOLUTION

According to the chapter, early janapadas were led by a rājā, whose position was generally hereditary — a rājā would usually be the son of the previous ruler.

However, the rājā was not expected to rule independently or arbitrarily. Each janapada had an assembly or council called sabhā or samiti, composed mainly of elders of the clan. The ruler was expected to take advice from this assembly as well as from ministers and administrators.

Significantly, some texts mention that an incompetent ruler could even be removed by the assembly, though the text cautions that this may not have been an established law, given the incomplete data for such remote periods.

In at least two mahājanapadas — Vajji (Vṛijji) and the neighbouring Malla — the system was different: these states, called gaṇas or saṅghas, were not monarchies. Their sabhā or samiti held more power, took important decisions through discussion and vote, and this even included the selection of the rājā. Scholars have therefore called them 'early republics', among the earliest such systems in the world.

Answer: In most janapadas the ruler (rājā) was hereditary, but he was advised by a sabhā or samiti (assembly of elders) and could, in principle, be removed if incompetent. In the gaṇas/saṅghas such as Vajji and Malla, the rājā was actually selected by the assembly through discussion and vote — making them early republics.

Q3 Imagine you are a historian studying ancient India. What types of sources (archaeological, literary, etc.) would you use to learn more about the mahājanapadas? Explain how each source might contribute to your understanding.

SOLUTION

As a historian studying the mahājanapadas, I would use two main categories of sources mentioned in the chapter, as well as additional ones:

1. Archaeological sources:
Excavations at ancient urban centres have confirmed the existence of mahājanapada capitals. Ruins of fortifications, moats, gateways, streets, and structures (such as those at Rājagṛiha, Kauśhāmbī, and Śhiśhupalgarh) reveal the size, layout, and military organisation of these cities. Artefacts like punch-marked coins, iron tools, and weapons show the economic and technological level of these societies.

2. Literary sources:
Late Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain literature is full of references to these new urban centres, the 16 mahājanapadas, their rulers, assemblies, and political systems. For example, Buddhist texts describe the gaṇas and saṅghas of Vajji and Malla. Ancient texts like Kauṭilya's Arthaśhāstra describe how a kingdom should be organised and governed.

3. Coins and inscriptions:
Punch-marked coins issued by different mahājanapadas, found across archaeological sites, provide evidence of trade networks and the extent of each state's economic reach. Later inscriptions can also shed light on political and social structures.

4. Ancient Tamil literature (for southern regions):
The most ancient Tamil literature mentions early southern kingdoms like the Cholas, Cheras, and Pāṇḍyas, and provides evidence of trade, culture, and political organisation in peninsular India.

Each source type fills gaps that others cannot: archaeology gives physical evidence of daily life and urban form; literature gives political and social context; coins and inscriptions confirm economic activity and political boundaries.

Answer: The main sources are: (1) archaeological excavations, which reveal city layouts, fortifications, artefacts, and coins; and (2) ancient literary sources — late Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, and Tamil literature — which describe the mahājanapadas, their rulers, assemblies, and trade. Coins and inscriptions provide additional economic and political evidence.

Q4 Why was the development of iron metallurgy so important for the growth of urbanism in the 1st millennium BCE? You may use points from the chapter but also from your knowledge or imagination.

SOLUTION

Iron metallurgy was a crucial driver of the Second Urbanisation for several interconnected reasons:

1. Agricultural expansion:
Iron tools — ploughs, axes, sickles — were far stronger and sharper than bronze or stone equivalents. They allowed farmers to clear forests, till harder soils, and cultivate land on a much larger scale. Greater agricultural output meant more food could support larger, denser populations — a prerequisite for cities.

2. Better weapons and military power:
Iron made lighter and sharper weapons than bronze — swords, spears, arrows, and shields. Mahājanapadas could build and equip larger armies. This enabled military campaigns that consolidated smaller territories into bigger, more powerful states, and also drove the construction of impressive fortifications around capitals.

3. Growth of trade and crafts:
Skilled ironworkers (blacksmiths) became an important occupational group. Iron tools benefited other crafts too — carpenters, builders, and miners all worked better with iron implements. This diversification of occupations is itself a feature of urban societies.

4. Infrastructure development:
Iron tools made it easier to construct roads, build fortifications, and develop urban infrastructure — supporting the growth of well-planned capital cities with moats, gateways, and broad streets.

In short, iron technology increased food production, enabled stronger armies and states, stimulated trade and crafts, and made large-scale construction possible — all of which together fuelled the rise of cities and organised states in the 1st

millennium BCE.

Answer: Iron metallurgy was important because: (1) iron farming tools enabled large-scale agriculture, producing enough food to support urban populations; (2) iron weapons were lighter and sharper than bronze, enabling more powerful armies and the consolidation of larger states; (3) iron tools boosted crafts, trade, and construction, all essential features of urban life.