Chapter 15: Empires and Kingdoms: 6th to 10th Centuries

Questions — Questions and Activities

Q1 If you lived in Kannauj during the struggle between the Pālas, the Pratīhāras and the Rāṣhṭrakūṭas, how would it change your daily life and your estimate of the rulers? Write a letter on this to your friend living in Kanchipuram.

SOLUTION

Model letter:

From: A resident of Kannauj
To: My dear friend in Kanchipuram

I hope this letter finds you well in your beautiful city under the peaceful Pallava rulers. Here in Kannauj, life has become very uncertain. Our city — prosperous and full of poets and scholars in Harsha's time — is now a prize fought over by three powerful kings: the Palas from the east, the Gurjara-Pratiharas from the west, and the Rashtrakutas from the Deccan. For two centuries now, they have been attacking, occupying, and losing Kannauj in turn, with no lasting winner.

The constant warfare disrupts trade and farming. Merchants hesitate to travel when armies march through the roads. Ordinary families sometimes flee the city when a new army approaches. Markets grow quieter after each raid. It is hard to feel loyalty to any one king when a new overlord arrives every few decades.

One king builds a great temple or patron a university — and we admire him. But then another king sacks the city, and our admiration turns to fear and exhaustion. We hear that Kannauj is attractive because of its location on the Ganga, its fertile plains, and its prestige as a symbol of power in north India. But for those of us who live here, this very fame brings us nothing but turmoil.

I envy you living in Kanchipuram, a stable capital of learning and fine temples. I hope our city finds peace soon.

Your friend from Kannauj

Answer: Model letter: A Kannauj resident writes that constant fighting between the Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas disrupts trade and daily life, making loyalty to any ruler difficult, and envies the stability of Kanchipuram under the Pallavas.

Q2 Emperors and kings during this period controlled only core regions and governed other regions through subordinate vassals. What would be the advantages and the challenges of such a system?

SOLUTION

During this period, kings like the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas ruled their core regions directly but governed other regions through subordinate rulers called samantas — the equivalent of tributaries or vassals.

Advantages:
Samantas were indispensable because they led armies and managed local administration. This allowed the overlord to extend his authority over vast territories without having to administer every region personally. It made it possible for large empires to function across the subcontinent, as local rulers had the knowledge and resources to handle day-to-day governance.

Challenges:
The loyalty of samantas could be fragile, especially when they felt that the empire's central authority was weakening. Some samantas, once subordinate, grew powerful enough to overthrow their overlords. The Rashtrakutas, for example, were originally samantas under the Chalukyas but eventually overthrew them. This constant risk of rebellion meant that overlords had to invest continuous effort in keeping their vassals loyal, making lasting supremacy difficult to maintain.

Answer: The samanta system allowed rulers to administer vast territories with local support, but carried the persistent risk that powerful vassals would grow strong enough to challenge or overthrow their overlords, as the Rashtrakutas did against the Chalukyas.

Q3 In what ways were the invasions of the Hunas and the Arabs different in their aims, methods, and impact on the Indian subcontinent? Prepare a write-up, discuss and present it in the class.

SOLUTION

The Hunas and the Arabs both invaded India, but they differed significantly in their aims, methods, and lasting impact.

Aims:
The Hunas were nomadic people from Central Asia whose primary aim was conquest and plunder. They pushed into the Ganga plains seeking territorial

expansion. The Arabs were driven by both political conquest and religious motivation: Muhammad bin Qasim declared it a religious war and sought to establish Islamic rule.

Methods:
The Hunas relied on their fearsome cavalry — horse-riding and archery enabling lightning-fast attacks — and pushed deep into northern India over a short period. The Arabs began with naval raids on India's western coast (at Thana, Bharukachchha and Debal in 637 CE) and, after repeated failures in Afghanistan, eventually conquered Sindh through organised military campaigns.

Impact:
The Hunas were effectively defeated by the Aulikara dynasty in the early 6th century, and by the 7th century had assimilated into Indian society — serving as soldiers, joining local administrations, and adopting Sanskrit, Prakrit, Gupta-style royal titles, and religious symbols.

The Arab impact was more limited. Within two years of Qasim's death, Indian chiefs rebelled and regained most conquered territory. Arab attempts to push into Rajputana and Malwa were repelled by rulers like the Gurjara-Pratihara king Nagabhata I and Kashmir's Lalitaditya Muktapida. After three centuries, Arab rule was limited to two petty states in Sindh and Punjab. Even there, Hindus and Buddhists were allowed to rebuild temples and continue worship, showing limited religious impact compared to Arab conquests elsewhere.

Answer: The Hunas were nomadic conquerors absorbed into Indian society, while the Arab invasions were religiously motivated campaigns that achieved only limited political impact — confined mainly to Sindh — unlike their far-reaching conquests elsewhere.

Q4 Imagine you are a common citizen watching the Prayāga assembly. How would you react to Harṣha giving away most of his wealth?

SOLUTION

Every five years, Harsha held an assembly at Prayaga (present-day Prayagraj) where, after sacred rites, he gave away much of his wealth to Buddhists, Brahmins, and the poor. Xuanzang witnessed and recorded this ceremony.

As a common citizen watching this event, one would likely feel a mix of wonder, gratitude, and admiration.

Wonder: The sheer scale of the assembly — attended by kings, religious leaders, and people from many walks of life — and the act of a powerful emperor parting with most of his personal wealth would be extraordinary to witness.

Gratitude: If one was among the poor receiving gifts, the generosity would directly improve one's life. Even as an observer, seeing the king share wealth with the poor and with religious communities would inspire trust in his care for his subjects.

Admiration: Harsha's willingness to give away wealth publicly would be seen as a sign of great virtue — a king who saw power not merely as privilege but as a responsibility to support his people and religious communities.

One might also wonder how the kingdom would replenish its treasury, and whether this act would motivate future kings to similar generosity.

Answer: A common citizen at Prayaga would feel awe at the spectacle, gratitude for the king's generosity toward the poor and religious communities, and deep admiration for Harsha's willingness to part with his wealth in a public act of virtue and dharma.

Q5 Forming groups, let each group choose one Ālvār and one Nāyanār and prepare a biography poster or booklet. Include their life stories and a sample poem or two (in translation).

SOLUTION

Guidance for the group activity:

What to do:
Each group chooses one Alvar (devotee of Vishnu) and one Nayanar (devotee of Shiva) from the lists studied. Good choices to start with include Andal (the only female Alvar), Nammalvar, or Tirugnana Sambandar among Alvars; and Appar, Sundarar, or Karaikkal Ammaiyar (a female Nayanar saint) among Nayanars.

What to include in the poster or booklet:
1. Name, approximate dates, and region (most were from South India, particularly Tamil-speaking areas).
2. Social background — the Bhakti saints came from diverse backgrounds, including people of lower social status, showing that bhakti was open to all.
3. The deity they were devoted to and the main theme of their poetry.

4. One or two short poems in translation (Tamil devotional poems are available in English translation in libraries and online).
5. Their legacy — how their poems were collected (e.g., Nalayira Divya Prabandham for Alvars) and how they shaped the Bhakti movement.

Key fact from the chapter: There were 12 Alvars (devotees of Vishnu, one of them a woman — Andal) and 63 Nayanars or Nayanmar (devotees of Shiva, including three women). Their Tamil devotional literature had an enormous impact, helping spread bhakti as a personal, direct relationship with the divine that was open across gender and social divisions.

Answer: Guidance: Choose one Alvar (e.g., Andal) and one Nayanar (e.g., Appar or Karaikkal Ammaiyar), and create a poster covering their background, the deity they worshipped, sample translated poems, and their role in the Bhakti movement. The 12 Alvars and 63 Nayanars came from diverse social backgrounds and their Tamil devotional poetry reshaped Indian society and literature.

Q6 You will notice that our maps show only ancient names for the kingdoms' capitals and main cities. Using a pencil, mark the modern names next to their original names. Refer the current map of India and try to locate those cities on it.

SOLUTION

Guidance for the map activity:

Using the chapter's maps, mark the following modern equivalents next to the ancient names:

Ancient name → Modern name (state):
Kanyakubja / Kannauj → Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh
Prayaga → Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh
Kanchi / Kanchipuram → Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu
Tanjāvūr → Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu
Mānyakheṭa → Malkheda, Karnataka
Ujjayinī → Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh
Bhillamāla → Bhinmal, Rajasthan
Vatapi → Badami, Karnataka
Shravanabelagola → Shravanabelagola, Karnataka (unchanged)
Debal → Near Karachi, present-day Pakistan
Thaneswar → Thanesar, Haryana

How to do it: Refer a current political map of India. Locate each modern city, then draw a small pencil mark or arrow on your textbook map linking the ancient name to the modern location. This helps you connect historical geography to today's map.

Answer: Guidance: On the chapter map, mark modern equivalents such as Kanyakubja=Kannauj (UP), Prayaga=Prayagraj (UP), Kanchi=Kanchipuram (TN), Tanjāvūr=Thanjavur (TN), Mānyakheṭa=Malkheda (Karnataka), Ujjayinī=Ujjain (MP), and Bhillamāla=Bhinmal (Rajasthan). Use a current India map for reference.

Q7 Match the ruler or the dynasty with the city.
(a) Rāṣhṭrakūṭas — (i) Kānchī
(b) Gurjara-Pratīhāras — (ii) Tanjāvūr
(c) Cholas — (iii) Mānyakheṭa
(d) Harṣhavardhana — (iv) Ujjayinī
(e) Pallavas — (v) Kānyakubja

SOLUTION

Matching each ruler or dynasty with their associated city, based on information from the chapter:

(a) Rashtrakutas → (iii) Mānyakheṭa: The Rashtrakutas shifted their power centre to present-day Karnataka, with their capital at Mānyakheṭa (modern Malkheda).

(b) Gurjara-Pratiharas → (iv) Ujjayinī: The Gurjara-Pratiharas' early capital was Bhillamala (modern Bhinmal), but their capital later shifted to Ujjayinī.

(c) Cholas → (ii) Tanjāvūr: Vijayalaya, who revived the Chola dynasty in the 9th century, established his new capital at Tanjāvūr (now Thanjavur).

(d) Harshavardhana → (v) Kānyakubja: Harshavardhana ruled from Kannauj, anciently known as Kānyakubja (in present-day Uttar Pradesh).

(e) Pallavas → (i) Kānchī: The Pallava dynasty had its capital at Kānchī (or Kanchipura, present-day Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu).

Answer: (a)–(iii) Mānyakheṭa; (b)–(iv) Ujjayinī; (c)–(ii) Tanjāvūr; (d)–(v) Kānyakubja; (e)–(i) Kānchī.