Chapter 5: State and Society up to 1000 CE

Questions — Questions and activities

Q1 How did political organisation change from the Vedic period to the age of large empires such as the Mauryas and the Guptas? Explain the administrative system of the early Indian states.

SOLUTION

Early Vedic society was organised into janas (clans) bound by kinship, led by a rājā who acted as clan chief. These kin-based groups gradually evolved into territorial units called janapadas (roughly 1000–600 BCE), as people developed identity tied to land rather than only to kinship.

From about 600 BCE, janapadas gave way to mahājanapadas — sixteen larger political units. Among these, Magadha rose to dominance due to its fertile plains and strategic location, eventually forming the basis of the Mauryan Empire.

The Mauryan Empire featured a structured administrative hierarchy: the king governed with a council of ministers (mantri-pariṣhad), while the kingdom was divided into provinces, districts, and villages. Kauṭilya's Arthaśhāstra identified seven constituents of the state (Saptāṁga): king, ministers, territory, forts, treasury, army, and allies.

The Gupta period retained this framework, adding new officers such as the sāndhivigrahika (minister of peace and war) and kumārāmātyas at local levels. Later empires like the Pallavas, Chālukyas, and Cholas combined centralised monarchy with decentralised local governance, with the village remaining the smallest and most self-reliant administrative unit.

Answer: Political organisation evolved from kin-based Vedic janas → territorial janapadas → mahājanapadas → empires (Maurya, Gupta, Chola). Administration was hierarchical: king and council at the top, provinces (bhuktis/manḍalas), districts (viṣhaya/nāḍu), and self-governing villages at the base.

Q2 Describe the role of the king, important officers, and the methods used to govern large territories.

SOLUTION

The king was the supreme authority and was expected to protect his subjects from external threats and internal disorder, administer justice, and govern in accordance with dharma. Kauṭilya's Arthaśhāstra notes that a king must be 'energetically active' for his officers to follow suit. While kingship was generally hereditary, texts also mention kings being elected or expelled, indicating that royal authority was not always absolute.

Central to administration was the council of ministers (mantri-pariṣhad), which included the treasurer, chief tax collector, chief legal advisor, and commander-in-chief. An Aśhokan inscription even records the council making decisions independently during the emperor's absence.

Large territories were governed through a layered system: provinces (bhuktis in the north, manḍalas in the south) → divisions (viṣhaya/koṭṭam) → districts (adhiṣhṭhāna/nāḍu) → groups of villages (vithis/kūṛram) → individual villages. District officers often consulted bankers, caravan

leaders, artisans, and scribes before making decisions.

At the local level, village assemblies (with committees called variyams) handled irrigation, taxation, land management, and justice largely independently. The Uttaramerur inscription of the Chola period describes the Kudavolai ballot-pot system for electing village assembly members, illustrating democratic local governance.

Answer: The king protected subjects and ensured justice, aided by a council of ministers. Large territories were governed through provinces, districts, and villages, with district officers consulting local representatives. Village assemblies managed local affairs independently, making the village the most self-reliant unit of governance.

Q3 After studying this chapter, what do you think were the most important features of the state and society in India before 1000 CE?

SOLUTION

The most important political feature was the evolution from small kin-based clans to large territorial empires with structured, multi-level administration. Empires like the Mauryas and Guptas developed sophisticated systems covering taxation, justice, irrigation, and trade regulation.

Socially, the varṇa system organised people into functional categories, but early society allowed considerable flexibility in occupation and social mobility. The family (kula) was the smallest social unit, connected to the village and then to the wider jana or political unit.

Economically, agriculture formed the backbone, supported by irrigation works, regulated land revenue (typically one-sixth of produce), and a flourishing guild system (śhreṇīs) that facilitated trade, acted as banks, and maintained professional standards. Major trade routes (Uttarāpatha and Dakṣhiṇāpatha) and ports like Arikameḍu linked India to distant markets.

Culturally, the ideal of dharma — ethical conduct and duty — guided both rulers and citizens. Educational institutions like Takṣhaśhilā and Nālandā promoted learning across many disciplines. The emergence of the Bhakti tradition offered a path of devotion accessible to all, regardless of varṇa or gender.

Answer: The most important features were: (1) evolution from clans to structured empires with layered administration; (2) a flexible varṇa-based social order with considerable mobility; (3) an agriculture-and-trade economy supported by guilds and irrigation; and (4) the guiding principle of dharma that united political, social, and cultural life.

Q4 What do early texts such as the Ṛigveda, Arthaśhāstra, and the Mahābhārata reveal about political and social life?

SOLUTION

The Ṛigveda, the earliest of the Vedas, reveals that early Vedic society was organised into janas (clans). It mentions three assemblies — sabhā, samiti, and vidhata — that participated in governance, suggesting that the rājā's power was not absolute. A verse in the Ṛigveda

(9.112.3) also shows occupational diversity within a single family, indicating that social roles were flexible and not strictly hereditary.

Kauṭilya's Arthaśhāstra is a systematic treatise on statecraft that describes the seven constituents of the state (Saptāṁga) and emphasises the importance of cooperation in governance ('one wheel does not move the carriage'). It defines key geographical concepts like prithivi (the domain between the Himalayas and the sea) and outlines detailed economic regulations covering trade, land revenue, and irrigation.

The Mahābhārata, particularly the Śhānti Parva, provides guidance on the ethical duties of kings — protecting subjects, ensuring justice, and working for the welfare of all beings. It also includes characters from all varṇas who uphold the principle of samatva (sameness/equality), showing that the ideal of non-discrimination was embedded in the epic tradition.

Answer: The Ṛigveda reveals clan-based society with consultative assemblies and flexible occupations. The Arthaśhāstra describes systematic statecraft, the seven constituents of the state, and economic regulations. The Mahābhārata outlines the king's ethical duties and upholds the ideal of samatva. Together, these texts show a society that valued both organised governance and moral conduct.

Q5 What can we learn from early Indian society about varṇa and the role of women?

SOLUTION

Early Vedic texts show that the varṇa system was initially functional rather than strictly hereditary. Social identity was shaped by occupation, ethnicity, region, gotra, and language. A Ṛigveda verse (9.112.3) describes a family with a poet, a physician, and a grinder of corn — illustrating occupational diversity and flexibility. The Buddhist text Sutta Nipāta further states that one is a brāhmaṇa by deeds, not by birth.

Over time, varṇas became more formalised (brāhmaṇas, kṣhatriyas, vaiśhyas, śhūdras), and a distinct social structure called jāti emerged due to intermarriage, endogamy, and regional differences. However, social mobility persisted — the Nandas, Mauryas, Guptas, and others came from diverse social backgrounds.

Regarding women, the Vedic period is described as one in which women held a respected position. Women attended the sabhā, composed Ṛigvedic hymns (Apālā, Viśhvavārā, Ghoṣhā, Lopāmudrā), and participated in rituals alongside men. The Manu-smṛiti states that where women are honoured, the gods rejoice.

Sangam literature portrays women as active participants in agriculture, trade, and culture. Celebrated poets like Avvaiyar flourished, and queens such as Sembiyan Mahādevī supported temple-building. Prabhāvatī Gupta served as regent and issued land grants, showing women's political agency. However, the chapter also notes that women's status fluctuated and sometimes declined over time.

Answer: Varṇa was originally functional and flexible, based on occupation rather than birth, though it grew more rigid over time. Jāti emerged from intermarriage and regional differences. Women in the Vedic period composed hymns and attended assemblies; later examples include women regents, Sangam poetesses, and donors on votive inscriptions — showing significant, if varied, participation in social, intellectual, and political life.

Q6 Explain how assemblies like sabhā and samiti limited the power of the rājā. Which modern institutions perform similar functions today?

SOLUTION

The Ṛigveda and Atharvaveda describe three assemblies in the Vedic period: the sabhā (a smaller body with primarily judicial functions, composed of select elites), the samiti (a larger assembly representing the broader population, focused on policy and political affairs), and the vidhata (a popular gathering of community members for discussions on warfare and political matters).

These assemblies meant that the rājā could not make decisions unilaterally; he had to work within the framework of deliberative bodies that represented different segments of society. References in texts to kings being 'elected' or 'expelled' further confirm that royal authority was not unlimited.

In modern India, similar functions are performed by Parliament and State Legislatures, which debate and approve laws and hold the executive accountable. The judiciary performs a function analogous to the sabhā by ensuring that governance is just and lawful. Gram Panchayats and Village Councils continue the tradition of local self-governance seen in the ancient village assemblies.

Answer: The sabhā (judicial body of elites), samiti (policy assembly of the broader population), and vidhata (popular community gathering) collectively checked the rājā's power by providing deliberative forums he had to work with. Today, Parliament and State Legislatures, the judiciary, and Gram Panchayats perform analogous functions of representation, oversight, and local governance.

Q7 What do the terms varṇa and jāti refer to in early Indian society? How were they different, and what factors may have contributed to the formation of various jātis?

SOLUTION

Varṇa refers to the fourfold social classification first mentioned in the Puruṣhasūkta (Book 10 of the Ṛigveda): brāhmaṇas (learning and rituals), kṣhatriyas (warfare and administration), vaiśhyas (agriculture and trade), and śhūdras (service to other varṇas). The number of varṇas was fixed at four, and early texts suggest that varṇa was based on occupation and function rather than exclusively on birth.

Jāti refers to smaller, more localised social groups that emerged over time. Unlike varṇa, there was no restriction on the number of jātis — they could multiply as new occupational groups or communities formed. Jāti was typically endogamous (marriage within the group) and tied to a

specific hereditary occupation.

The key difference is scope and fixity: varṇa is a broad, pan-Indian fourfold framework, while jāti is a narrower, community-specific grouping. Varṇa was originally functional and flexible; jāti became the primary lived reality of social identity.

Factors that contributed to the formation of jātis include: intermarriage among varṇa groups creating new intermediate categories; migrating communities becoming endogamous over time; regional and territorial differences leading distinct groups to develop separate identities; and the growth of new occupations and crafts that created new professional communities.

Answer: Varṇa is the pan-Indian fourfold framework (brāhmaṇas, kṣhatriyas, vaiśhyas, śhūdras) based on function. Jāti are smaller, endogamous, hereditary occupational groups that multiplied without limit. Jātis formed through intermarriage between varṇas, migration and endogamy of communities, regional differences, and the emergence of new occupations.

Q8 Why do you think education in early India emphasised both knowledge and moral values? How might this have benefited society?

SOLUTION

Early Indian education aimed at holistic development of the individual, not merely vocational training. The gurukula system cultivated inner values such as truth, patience, humility, control of the senses, purity of self (sattvaśhuddhi), and reverence for all beings. The guiding principle was dharma, which required every person — including students — to fulfil duties towards parents, teachers, the gods, and society.

This integration of knowledge and ethics was intentional: students studied the Vedas, grammar, logic, philosophy, mathematics, science, medicine, and astronomy alongside arts, yoga, and meditation. The teacher–student relationship (guru-śhiṣhya paramparā) was treated as sacred, making the guru a moral exemplar, not merely an instructor.

For society, this approach had significant benefits. Rulers and administrators who had received such education were expected to govern justly and protect their people — as seen in texts like the Arthaśhāstra and the Mahābhārata. A citizenry trained in moral values helped maintain social harmony. The emphasis on dharma also meant that wealth (artha) and desire (kāma) were to be pursued only in ways that benefited the wider community.

Answer: Early Indian education combined knowledge and moral values because individual conduct was seen as the foundation of a harmonious society. Training in dharma ensured that students — whether they became rulers, administrators, merchants, or farmers — fulfilled their social duties ethically. This produced just rulers and a cohesive society in which intellectual achievement and public welfare reinforced each other.

Q9 Look at the major trade routes of early India (Fig 5.12). How do you think these routes helped people in the exchange of goods, skills, beliefs, and cultural practices.

SOLUTION

Two major land routes — Uttarāpatha (the northern route) and Dakṣhiṇāpatha (the southern route) — had emerged by around the 6th century BCE and were maintained and expanded by successive dynasties. These routes linked different parts of the subcontinent and connected inland regions with coastal ports such as Arikameḍu, Kāveripaṭṭinam, and Muziris.

The movement of traders along these routes facilitated the exchange of goods: the Arthaśhāstra records Magadha trading textiles, gems, coral, pearls, metals, and minerals with various regions. The Chera region exported jackfruit, pepper, and turmeric, while cotton from the Deccan and textiles from Mathurā, Kāśhī, and Kāmarūpa reached distant markets.

Beyond goods, trade routes were channels for the movement of people, skills, and ideas. Guilds (śhreṇīs) of artisans — such as the silk weavers who migrated from Lata (Gujarat) to Dashapura (Madhya Pradesh) — carried their craftsmanship to new regions. Buddhist missionaries, merchants, and scholars travelled along the same routes, spreading religious beliefs and philosophical ideas across the subcontinent and beyond.

Trade with Rome through sea routes and overland connections via Central Asia further expanded India's cultural interactions. Thus, trade routes were arteries of civilisation, integrating diverse regions into shared economic and cultural networks.

Answer: Trade routes like the Uttarāpatha and Dakṣhiṇāpatha linked inland regions with coastal ports, enabling the exchange of commodities (textiles, gems, spices, metals), skills (guilds of artisans migrating with their crafts), religious ideas (Buddhist missionaries, Bhakti traditions), and cultural practices across the subcontinent and into West Asia, Rome, and Southeast Asia.

Q10 What might have been the advantages and challenges of ruling a large empire in the absence of modern communication systems?

SOLUTION

Ruling a large empire without modern communication was both a creative challenge and a source of structural vulnerability. Among the advantages, decentralised administration — dividing the empire into provinces, districts, and self-governing villages — allowed local decisions to be made without constant reference to the centre. The Mauryan empire's use of inscriptions (like Aśhoka's edicts) to spread policies across distant regions was an effective low-tech communication strategy.

The council of ministers (mantri-pariṣhad) could even take decisions in the king's absence, as recorded in an Aśhokan inscription. Local officials such as pradeśhikas (district governors) and village headmen (grāmikas) ensured governance reached the ground level. Trade routes doubled as information highways for the movement of people and news.

However, the challenges were significant. Slow information flow made it difficult for the king to respond quickly to rebellions, natural disasters, or invasions at distant frontiers. Governors and provincial officers could abuse their autonomy. The empire depended heavily on the loyalty and

competence of local officers, and any breakdown in this chain could lead to fragmentation — as indeed happened after the death of strong rulers like Aśhoka.

Answer: Advantages included decentralised administration through provinces and self-governing villages, use of inscriptions to broadcast policies, and a council of ministers empowered to act in the king's absence. Challenges included slow response to distant crises or rebellions, reliance on the loyalty of local officers, and the risk of fragmentation when central authority weakened.

Q11 Many ideas about governance come from texts composed by scholars and advisors of the king. What might be some limitations of relying only on such sources?

SOLUTION

Texts like the Arthaśhāstra, Mahābhārata, Manu-smṛiti, and Kāmandaka's Nītisāra were composed by scholars, Brahmin advisors, or court intellectuals who were closely associated with the ruling elite. This proximity means these texts reflect the ideals and interests of those in power, rather than the lived reality of ordinary people — farmers, artisans, traders, or women.

Such sources tend to describe how governance should work rather than how it actually worked. The prescriptive nature of these texts means historians must be careful not to mistake ideal norms for actual practice. For example, texts may describe a perfectly just king, while epigraphic or archaeological evidence might reveal a more complex or harsher reality.

Voices that are absent from these texts — those of śhūdras, women (except in idealised roles), tribal communities, and the poor — leave significant gaps in our understanding. Historians therefore need to supplement literary sources with inscriptions, coins, archaeological findings, and regional literature like the Sangam texts to get a more complete and balanced picture of early Indian society.

Answer: These texts represent elite, often Brahmin perspectives and describe ideals rather than actual practice. They omit the voices of ordinary people, women, śhūdras, and tribal communities. Relying solely on them risks mistaking prescriptive norms for historical reality. Historians must cross-check them with inscriptions, coins, archaeology, and regional literature like Sangam texts for a fuller picture.

Q12 Read the source and answer the questions:

The Nāśhik cave inscription (2nd century CE) of Uṣhavadāta records:

"Uṣhavadāta, son of Dinika, son-in-law of king Nahapāna … has bestowed this cave on the Saṁgha generally; he has also given a perpetual endowment, three thousand—3000 kāhāpaṇas, which, for the members of the Saṁgha of any sect, and any origin dwelling in this cave, will serve as cloth money and money for outside life (kuśhaṇa); and those kāhāpaṇas have been invested in guild dwelling at Govadhana—2000 in a weavers' guild, interest one pratika (monthly) for the hundred, (and) 1000 in another weaver's guild, interest three quarters of a paḍika (monthly) for the hundred."

a. What does this source tell us about the economic role of guilds?

b. Why were guilds trusted with money deposits?

c. Identify the donor and the donees from the given source.

SOLUTION

a. The inscription shows that guilds (śhreṇīs) functioned not only as associations of craftspersons but also as financial institutions. The donation of 3,000 kāhāpaṇas was invested in two weavers' guilds at fixed rates of interest, and the interest generated was used to support the Buddhist Saṁgha. This confirms that guilds accepted deposits, paid interest, and generated income on behalf of their depositors — functioning much like banks.

b. Guilds were trusted with money deposits because they were well-established, disciplined institutions with their own internal courts that enforced professional standards and conduct. They had a proven record of managing funds, regulating trade, and maintaining financial credibility. The fact that a royal son-in-law chose to invest a large religious endowment with them indicates that guilds enjoyed high social and economic trust.

c. The donor is Uṣhavadāta, son of Dinika and son-in-law of king Nahapāna. The donees are the members of the Saṁgha (Buddhist monastic community) of any sect and any origin who dwell in the cave bestowed upon them.

Answer: a. Guilds acted as banking institutions, accepting deposits and paying fixed interest, using the returns to fund religious institutions. b. Guilds were trusted because they were organised, had internal discipline enforced by guild courts, and had a strong reputation for financial reliability. c. Donor: Uṣhavadāta (son of Dinika, son-in-law of king Nahapāna). Donees: members of the Buddhist Saṁgha (any sect, any origin) dwelling in the donated cave.

Q13 Mark and locate on the map of India the following important centres: Pāṭaliputra, Nāśhik, Ujjayinī, Vikramśhila, Kānchipuram, Mathurā, Rājgṛiha.

SOLUTION

This is a map-marking activity. Draw an outline map of India and mark the following with dots and labels:

- Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna, Bihar) — on the south bank of the Ganga in eastern India; Mauryan and Gupta capital.
- Nāśhik (Maharashtra) — on the upper Godavari River in western India; site of the famous cave inscription.

- Ujjayinī (modern Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh) — on the Kshipra River in central India; an important mahājanapada capital and trade centre.
- Vikramśhilā (Bihar, near modern Bhagalpur) — on the Ganga in eastern India; a major Buddhist university established in the late 8th century CE.
- Kānchīpuram (Tamil Nadu) — in the northern part of Tamil Nadu near the Palar River; Pallava capital and centre of learning.
- Mathurā (Uttar Pradesh) — on the Yamuna River in northern India; a major trade and cultural centre.
- Rājgṛiha (modern Rajgir, Bihar) — in the hills of eastern India; early capital of Magadha.

Answer: Draw an outline map of India. Mark and label: Pāṭaliputra (Patna, Bihar), Nāśhik (Maharashtra, on Godavari), Ujjayinī (Ujjain, MP, on Kshipra), Vikramśhilā (near Bhagalpur, Bihar), Kānchīpuram (Tamil Nadu), Mathurā (UP, on Yamuna), and Rājgṛiha (Rajgir, Bihar). Each point should be accurately placed in its approximate geographic region.

Q14 Prepare a short presentation or poster on one of the following—
a. Life in the Vedic society
b. Early education system (gurukula)
c. Trade and guilds in early India
d. Role of women in early Indian society

SOLUTION

This is a creative project activity. Choose one topic and prepare a poster or short presentation (4–6 slides or a single illustrated poster) using information from the chapter.

For (a) Life in the Vedic Society: include the jana/kula social structure, the three assemblies (sabhā, samiti, vidhata), the rājā's role, the four varṇas, the āśhrama system, yajñas, and examples of occupational flexibility from Ṛigveda 9.112.3.

For (b) Early Education System (Gurukula): describe the gurukula setting (teacher's home), the guru-śhiṣhya paramparā, subjects studied (Vedas, grammar, mathematics, arts, yoga), inner values cultivated, and how it differs from modern schooling.

For (c) Trade and Guilds in Early India: cover the Uttarāpatha and Dakṣhiṇāpatha routes, major ports (Arikameḍu, Kāveripaṭṭinam, Muziris), key traded goods, the Nāśhik cave inscription as evidence of guilds acting as banks, and the role of śhreṇīs in regulating trade.

For (d) Role of Women in Early Indian Society: highlight Vedic women sages (Apālā, Lopāmudrā), the sabhā attendance, Sangam poetesses (Avvaiyar), Prabhāvatī Gupta as regent, Sembiyan Mahādevī's temple patronage, and women's roles in agriculture and crafts per Sangam literature.

Answer: Guidance: Select one topic and create a poster or short presentation. Include at least 4–5 specific facts from the chapter, use headings and bullet points for clarity, and add simple illustrations or a map where appropriate. All information should be sourced from what the chapter describes — no outside facts needed.