Ancient Pataliputra and its Surroundings

Kautilya, in his text the Arthaśhāstra, stated that a country cannot exist without people and a kingdom cannot exist without a country. Pataliputra, which corresponds to modern-day Patna, was a major ancient city designed with strong defensive and economic features.

- The city was protected by a moat and a sturdy drawbridge that could be lifted whenever there was a danger of an attack.
- Its architecture featured towering wooden ramparts equipped with watchtowers, majestic palaces, and lively, well-planned streets.
- The distant hills and forests supplied the city with timber, herbs, and other valuable resources.
- Elephants were actively captured from these forests and specifically trained for the army.
- Caves were carved out of nearby hills to serve as shelters for communities of monks.
- Pataliputra hosted a bustling market that attracted traders from distant lands, offering goods such as Chinese silk, spices and gems from the south, and fine regional clothing.
- Street acrobats provided daily entertainment for the citizens and occasionally the king by building human pyramids, singing, dancing, and acting in short plays.

The Concept and Features of an Empire

The word 'empire' is derived from the Latin word 'imperium', which translates to 'supreme power'. An empire consists of a collection of smaller kingdoms or territories controlled by a powerful ruler or a group of rulers, often established after waging war.

- The smaller territories within an empire retained their own regional kings or chiefs, who acted as tributaries to the emperor.
- A tributary or vassal is a ruler who submits to an emperor and pays tribute using money, gold, grain, livestock, elephants, or valuable goods to demonstrate loyalty and respect.
- Emperors ruled their vast territories from a capital city, which served as a major centre of economic and administrative power.
- Ancient Sanskrit texts utilized specific terms for an emperor, including *samrāj* ('the lord of all' or 'supreme ruler'), *adhirāja* ('overlord'), and *rājādhirāja* ('king of kings').
- An empire must maintain a large army to keep tributary states under control, expand its borders, and protect itself from external aggression.
- It requires a structured administration with officials to manage territories, collect taxes, and maintain law and order.

- Empires make laws, issue currencies, regulate weights, measures, and trade, and control access to crucial resources like mines, forests, and manpower.
- They actively encourage art, literature, religions, and centres of learning, and build communication networks such as roads and river or sea navigation infrastructure.

Trade, Trade Routes, and Guilds

Maintaining an empire and its massive army requires significant economic power, control over the workforce, and access to a variety of resources. Economic activities, especially production and trade, were fundamental to the survival of an empire and the welfare of its people.

- Establishing and controlling trade routes expanded the quantity and variety of goods traded.
- Increased trade generated more income for producers and resulted in higher tax collections for the rulers.
- Traded goods in ancient India included textiles, spices, agricultural produce, gems, handicrafts, and animals.
- Traders, craftsmen, moneylenders, and agriculturists formed powerful collaborative associations known as guilds or *shrenīs*.
- A guild typically operated under an elected head and executive officers who were expected to possess strong ethical qualities.
- Guilds allowed members to share resources, market information, and workforce details, transforming them from competitors into collaborators.
- Guilds held the autonomy to create their own internal rules, and enlightened kings generally refrained from interfering with their operations.

The Rise of Magadha

The period between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE witnessed profound changes in north India, characterized by the existence of sixteen large kingdoms known as *mahājanapadas*. Magadha, located in modern-day south Bihar, emerged as a dominant power under the leadership of early kings like Ajātaśhatru.

- Magadha benefited immensely from its location in the resource-rich Ganga plains, which provided fertile land, abundant timber forests, and elephants.
- Access to iron ore and other minerals from nearby hilly regions was crucial for the kingdom's expansion.
- The use of iron ploughs significantly increased agricultural production, while lighter and sharper iron weapons strengthened the military's capabilities.
- Around the 5th century BCE, Mahāpadma Nanda founded the Nanda dynasty, successfully uniting smaller kingdoms and expanding across eastern and northern India.
- Mahāpadma Nanda issued punch-marked silver coins to demonstrate and consolidate his economic power.

- The renowned Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini, who composed the 3,996 sūtras of the *Ashṭādhyāyi*, lived during the period of the Nandas.
- The last Nanda emperor, Dhana Nanda, possessed great wealth but became highly unpopular due to his severe oppression and exploitation of the people.

➢ **The Arrival of the Greeks**

The northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent hosted smaller kingdoms, including the Pauravas led by King Porus, situated along ancient routes connecting to the Mediterranean. Alexander, a young and powerful king from Macedonia, launched military campaigns that significantly impacted world history.

- Between 334 and 331 BCE, Alexander conquered the Persian Empire to avenge earlier Persian invasions of Greece.
- Between 327 and 325 BCE, Alexander pushed eastward into India and defeated King Porus in Punjab at the Battle of the Hydaspes.
- Alexander encountered fierce resistance from local Indian tribes; Greek records noted that women fought alongside men in some battles, and Alexander himself was seriously wounded.
- After the battle, Alexander asked Porus how he wished to be treated; Porus replied, "Like a King," prompting Alexander to spare him and leave him as a satrap (governor) of his kingdom.
- Alexander's tired and homesick soldiers refused to advance towards the Ganga River, forcing a retreat through the southern coastal route and Iranian deserts, resulting in heavy troop losses due to thirst, hunger, and disease.
- Alexander died in Babylon at the age of 32 between 324 and 323 BCE, which led to his massive empire being divided among his generals and satraps.
- During his time in India, Alexander engaged in a philosophical dialogue with a group of Indian sages known to the Greeks as 'Gymnosophists' or naked philosophers.
- Alexander tested the sages with tricky riddles under the threat of death, but he was highly impressed by their calm and intelligent responses and chose to spare all of their lives.

➢ **The Mighty Mauryas and Kautilya**

Following the decline of the unpopular Nanda empire, a new dynasty emerged around 321 BCE. Chandragupta Maurya founded the Maurya Empire, successfully taking control of Magadha with Pāṭaliputra as its capital.

- Chandragupta's success was heavily guided by Kautilya, also known as Chāṇakya or Vishnugupta, a renowned teacher from the Takşhaśhilā (Taxila) university.
- Kautilya had previously warned Dhana Nanda about his collapsing empire; after being insulted and expelled from the court, Kautilya vowed to end the Nanda rule.

- Chandragupta defeated the Greek satraps in the northwest and expanded the empire from the northern plains all the way to the Deccan plateau.
- Diplomatic relations were maintained with the Greeks, and Chandragupta hosted the Greek historian and diplomat Megasthenes, who authored the early written account *Indika*.
- Kautilya outlined his comprehensive vision for a kingdom in the *Arthaśhāstra*, a text detailing directives on governance, economics, defence, agriculture, and justice.
- Kautilya introduced the concept of *saptānga*, detailing the seven constituent parts of a kingdom: the king (*swami*), officials and ministers (*amātya*), territory and population (*janapada*), fortified towns (*durga*), treasury (*koşha*), defence forces (*danda*), and allies (*mitra*).
- Kautilya emphasized that a king's primary duty is to promote the welfare of his people, explicitly stating that a king's happiness lies entirely in the happiness and welfare of his subjects.

➢ **Emperor Ashoka and the Path of Peace**

Ashoka (268–232 BCE), the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, expanded the empire to encompass almost the entire Indian subcontinent, excluding only the southernmost region. A pivotal military encounter completely transformed his approach to life and governance.

- Ashoka waged a ferocious and destructive war to conquer the region of Kalinga, which corresponds to modern-day Odisha.
- Witnessing the massive death and destruction on the battlefield caused Ashoka to permanently abandon violence and adopt the Buddha's teachings of peace and non-violence.
- He actively dispatched emissaries to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Central Asia, and other regions to spread the Buddha's message far and wide.
- Ashoka communicated directly with his subjects by issuing edicts engraved on rocks and pillars, aiming to encourage the people to follow *dharma*.
- The edicts were primarily written in Prakrit, the common language of the time, using the Brahmi script, which serves as the mother of all regional Indian scripts.
- In his edicts, Ashoka referred to himself as 'Devanampiya Piyadasi', meaning 'Beloved of the Gods' and 'one who regards others with kindness'.
- Ashoka's welfare initiatives included providing medical treatment for both humans and animals, prohibiting animal cruelty, and actively planting shade and fruit trees.
- He constructed rest houses and dug wells at regular intervals along the main roads to assist travellers traversing the empire.

- He formally instructed city magistrates to practice strict impartiality, treat all subjects as his children, and avoid imprisoning or torturing people without a valid reason.

- **Life, Art, and Architecture under the Mauryas**

Cities during the Mauryan period served as bustling hubs of governance and commerce, featuring well-planned streets and public buildings. The society was well-structured, supported by agricultural prosperity, extensive trade, and efficient administration.

- The Sohgaura copper plate inscription, dating to the 4th or 3rd century BCE, is an early administrative record mentioning the establishment of a granary to ensure food security during famines.
- A substantial portion of the population was engaged in agriculture, planting two crops a year utilizing both summer and winter rains, which kept food plentiful.
- Farmers and agricultural activities were strictly protected from the disturbances of nearby warfare.
- Cities were populated by artisans such as blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, and jewellers, and featured streets with clear signage.
- Houses were constructed from wood, reaching up to two storeys in height, and streets were equipped with water vessels to manage fire emergencies.
- People wore cotton clothing consisting of a lower garment reaching below the knee and an upper garment thrown over the shoulders.
- Some individuals wore leather shoes featuring specific designs and thick soles to make themselves look taller.
- The Great Stūpa at Sanchi, originally built of bricks and later expanded using stone, stands as one of India's finest architectural examples from this era.
- Ashoka commissioned numerous stūpas, *chaityas*, and *vihāras* specifically designed for worship, meditation, and study.
- A life-size rock sculpture of an elephant at Dhauli was carved to symbolize the Buddha's qualities of intelligence, power, patience, and calm.
- The highly polished stone capital of the Sarnath pillar features four lions symbolizing royal power, alongside carvings of an elephant, bull, horse, lion, and the *dharmachakra* (wheel of dharma).
- This Sarnath capital was chosen as India's national emblem, paired with the motto *satyameva jayate* ("truth alone triumphs"), which is derived directly from the Mundaka Upanishad.

- **The Fragile Nature of Empires**

The Maurya empire survived for about half a century following Ashoka's death before experiencing a major structural decline. Around 185 BCE, many smaller kingdoms successfully broke away from the central authority and became independent.

- Empires are inherently fragile because they are almost always established and maintained through military force, warfare, and repression.
- Local rulers and tributary states often seized opportunities to declare independence when an emperor demanded excessive tribute to fund long military campaigns or during periods of drought.
- The presence of a weak successor frequently prompted local kings and chieftains to stop paying tribute to the central authority.
- The immense size of an empire made it exceedingly difficult to govern effectively, with far-off territories usually being the first to split away.
- Economic crises triggered by severe natural calamities, such as prolonged droughts or massive floods, heavily destabilized an empire's economic structure.