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Distance Learning Programme (DLP)

ANCIENT INDIA

(UPSC PRELIMS)



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MAHAJANAPADAS

Around sixth century BCE, the increasing use of iron formed the conditions for the rise of large territorial states. On one hand the agricultural tools and implements enabled the peasants to produce more grains than the requirements and on the other the iron weapon made the warrior class more significant, who by then started not only to protect their land but also to expand at the cost of their neighbouring areas. Thus, the tribal polity gave way to the rise of territorial states towards the end of later Vedic age. The Janapadas as mentioned in the later Vedic texts, Jain and Buddhist sources, signify that the regions with different types of human settlements came to acquire geographical names for the first time in Indian history. These units or Janapadas became the centres for the development of uniform language, customs and beliefs.

Permanent settlement in a particular area gave a geographical identity to a tribe or a group of tribes residing in the area. A passage from the Astadhyayi of Panini, makes it clear that the people owed their allegiance to the Janapada (territory) to which they belonged rather than to the Jana or the tribe.

Rise of Mahajanapadas

By 500 BCE, Janapadas became a common feature. Over forty Janapadas covering even Afghanistan and south-eastern Central Asia are mentioned by Panini. By the 6th century BCE, some of the Janapadas developed into Mahajanapadas like Magadha, Kosala, etc.

Many of the Mahajanapadas came up by incorporating Janapadas which were earlier independent.

Some of the reasons for the rise of Mahajanapadas are:

- New agricultural tools and implements enabled the peasants to clear the forests, increase the arable land and produce a good amount of surplus. It met not only the needs of the ruling class, but also supported numerous towns such as Champa, Rajagriha, Ayodhya, Kaushambi, Kashi, etc., in the Ganges plains.
- The agricultural expansion also led to the growth of population.

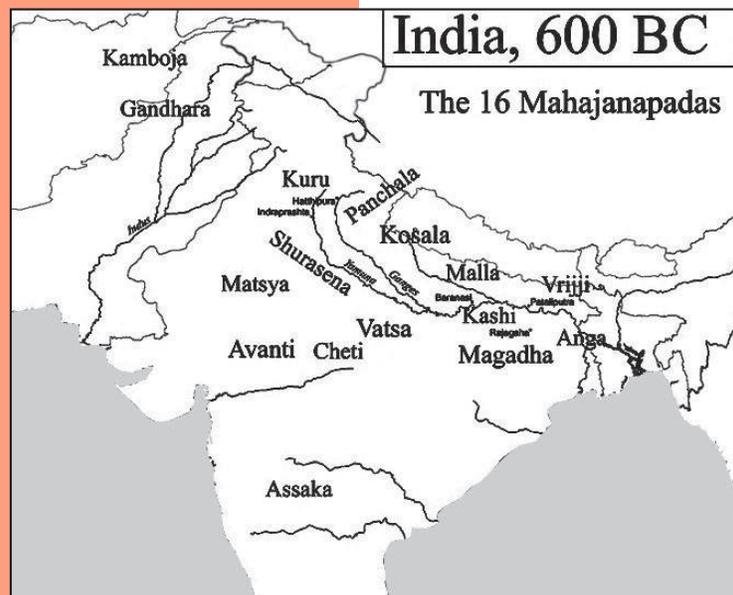


Fig: Sixteen Mahajanapadas



- The appearance of urban centres led to the emergence of different social groups such as gahapati, merchants, settlers, etc., pursuing different occupations and multiple activities.
- The exchange of goods and services and regular trade also led to the emergence of professional middlemen and merchants. There was regular trade connections between cities and towns.
- Cattle were no longer considered a major strength of wealth. Money economy had surpassed the barter system. This led to the chiefs of the lineages constantly at war with each other either to show their might or financial strength and follow expansionist policies to garner more resources at their disposal.
- The widespread use of iron also led to the formation of large territorial states. These states were better equipped militarily and warrior class played an important role in their rise.
- Gradually a regular system of taxation and the army also developed. The distinction between Raja (Ruler) and Praja (the ruled) became more pronounced.

The Mahajanapadas

According to the Buddhist canonical text Ahguttara Nikaya, there were sixteen states of considerable extent and power, known as “Solasa Mahajanapada” in Jambudipa (Bharatvarsha). The sixteen Mahajanapadas were either monarchical or republican in their political organization. The monarchies were mainly found in the Gangetic Plains while the republics were situated around the foothills of the Himalayas and in the north-western India in modern Punjab.

The sixteen Mahajanapadas enumerated in the Anguttara Nikaya are – (1) Anga, (2) Magadha, (3) Kasi, (4) Kosala, (5) Yajji, (6) Malla, (7) Chhedi, (8) Yamsa, (9) Kuru, (10) Pancala, (11) Maccha, (12) Surasena, (13) Assaka, (14) Avanti, (15) Gandhara (16) Kamboja.

Mahajanapadas

- **Monarchies:** Gandhara, Kamboja, Kashi, Vatsa, Avanti, Chedi, Kuru, Panchala, Matsya, Anga, Kosala, Magadha and Surasena
- **Republics:** Assaka, Malla & Vajji

Monarchies

Kashi

- Of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, Kashi was probably the first and the most powerful in the beginning.
- It seemed to have emerged as a major town around 450 BCE. Its capital was at Varanasi.
- It was famous for cotton textiles and market for horses. It perhaps played an important part in the subversion of the Videhan monarchy.
- Ancient Kashi was bound by river Varuna in the north and river Assi in the south.
- Kashi was in constant conflict with the kingdoms of Kosala, Magadha, and Anga. Though Kosala was once defeated by Kashi, it was later annexed by Kosala. Subsequently, it was annexed by Ajatasatru to Magadha.



Kosala

- The Shatpath Brahman gives a description of Kosala Mahajanapadas. With its capital at Shravasti, it was located in the north west of Magadha, around the area occupied by present eastern Uttar Pradesh.
- On the west, Kosala was bound by the river Gomati, on the southern side by the river Sarpika or Syandika, on the east by the Sadanira (Gandak) which separated it from Videha and on the north by the Nepal hills.
- Ayodhya, Saketa and Shravasti were three important Kosalan cities. The kings of Kosala favoured Brahmanism and Buddhism.
- Prasenjit, the Kosalan king was the contemporary of king Bimbisara and Ajatasatru of Magadha. Prasenjit's sister was married to Bimbisara, the king of Magadha, and Kashi was given to her as dowry. However, a dispute with Ajatasatru, son of Bimbisara soon led to discord. Ajatasatru put his father to death, whose wife, sister of Prasenjit, died due to grief. Prasenjit, in retaliation, confiscated Kashi.
- A war broke out between both sides and the conflict finally ended with reconciliation. Prasenjit's daughter Vajjira was married to Ajatasatru and Kashi was given as dowry to the bride.
- Though Prasenjit did not embrace Buddhism, one of the Bharhut sculptures highlights cordiality between Prasenjit and Buddha.
- Finally, Kosala was annexed by Magadha during Ajatasatru's reign after the death of Prasenjit.
- Koshala also included the tribal republican territory of the Sakyas of Kapilvastu. The capital of Kapilvastu is identified with Piprahwa in Basti district, which is situated at a distance of 15 km from Lumbini in Nepal (another capital of the Sakyas and also the birthplace of Gautam Buddha).

Anga

- The Anga country was very ancient as is evident from the reference made to it in the ancient Brahmanical works like the Aitareya Brahmana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Ramayana.
- Anga was located in the east of Magadha and west of Raj Mahal hills. It had its capital at Champa. It roughly corresponds to the modern districts of Munger and Bhagalpur.
- It was noted for its wealth and commerce and its merchants regularly visited Suvarnabhumi.
- It was annexed to Magadha during the times of Bimbisara and it was the only conquest of Bimbisara.

Magadha

- The name Magadha first appears in the Atharvaveda. One of the most prominent Mahajanapadas, It was located between Anga and Vatsa. It corresponds roughly to modern Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar and eastern parts of Bengal.
- It was bounded on the north and west by the rivers Ganga and Son, on the south by the Vindhya outcrop and on the east by the river Champa.
- Rajagriha or Girivraja, protected by five hills, was the early Magadhan capital. Later the capital was shifted to Pataliputra.



- The earliest dynasty of Magadha was founded by Brihadratha. However, Magadha came into prominence under Bimbisara and Ajatasatru.
- Magadha had the republic of the Licchavis as neighbour and the Ganges formed the boundary between these two countries. During the reign of Ajatasatru Magadha also came in conflict with the Vajjis.
- At the ancient site of Pataliputra was Pataligama where the ministers of Ajatasatru built a fort to repel the Vajjis.
- The ancient city of Giribaja was encircled by the five hills of fame – Isigili, Vepulla, Yebhara, Pandava and Gijjhakuta.

Vatsa

- The Vatsa appears to be one from the Rig Vedic period. It is said to be an offshoot of the Kurus, who shifted from Hastinapur and settled in Kaushambi.
- Vatsa kingdom corresponds to the modern districts of Allahabad and Mirzapur in UP. Its capital was Kaushambi (near Allahabad).
- Kaushambi, a very prosperous city and was the most important entry point of goods and passengers from the south and the west.
- Udayana, the ruler of this country in the sixth century BCE, had to struggle against king Ajatasatru of Magadha and king Pradyota of Avanti. Udayana entered into a matrimonial alliance with the king of Magadha. The ruler of Avanti invaded Kaushambi but he was unsuccessful in his attempt. He had to marry his daughter to Udayana.
- In the Pali Buddhist literature, king Udayana of the Vatsas is said to have been a contemporary of the Buddha. In the beginning, Udayana was opposed to Buddhism, but later on he became a follower of the Buddha and made Buddhism the state religion. Later, during the reign of Palaka, Vatsa was annexed to the Avanti kingdom.

Avanti

- The kingdom of Avanti roughly corresponded to modern Malwa. Initially Ujjayini was the capital of northern Avanti and Mahismati was the capital of Southern Avanti. Later Ujjayini or modern Ujjain became the capital of integrated Avanti.
- The river Betravati divided Avanti into north and south.
- The ruler of Avanti during the time of the Buddha was Chanda Pradyota. He was a contemporary of Udayana of Kaushambi. Although he was given the name of 'Chanda' on account of his ferocity, he became a convert to Buddhism.
- Avanti became a very important centre of Buddhism. The kingdom of Avanti was finally annexed to the Magadhan Empire by Sishunaga.

Gandhara

- The state of Gandhara roughly corresponded to modern Kashmir and extended upto the Kabul valley.
- Its capital was at Taxila which was a famous seat of learning. Panini and Kautilya were the disciples as well as teachers of Taxila university. The scholars came from all over the world to Taxila.
- Located on the Uttarapatha, it was a centre of commercial activities.
- According to the Buddhist tradition, the Gandhara King Pukkusati exchanged gifts with Bimbisara in Magadha and went on foot to see the Buddha.



- Later, it formed the twentieth province of the Achaemenid Empire (Persian) according to the Greek historian, Herodotus.

Kamboja

- It was the country adjoining Gandhara in the extreme North-West with Dwarka as its capital. Kamboja is constantly associated with Gandhara in literature and inscriptions. They are referred to in Yaska's Nirukta. Asoka's edicts refer to Kamboja along with Yona as frontier provinces.
- Around little before 530 BCE, it fell prey to the attack of Cyrus, the Achaemenid emperor of Persia. Cyrus I is said to have destroyed the Kamboja city of Kapisi (modern Begram).
- During Kautilya's time, Kamboja transformed from a monarchy to a republic.
- The horses of Kamboja were famous throughout all periods of Indian history. Sumangalavilasini describes Kamboja as the home for horses.

Matsya

- The Matsyas appear to have been one of the prominent Ksatriya tribes that made up the Vedic Aryan people in the earliest period of their residence in India.
- A hymn in the Rigveda refers to the Matsyas who were attacked by Turvasa, a famous king. The Satapatha Brahmana, the Kausitaki Upanisad, the Mahabharata, the Padmapurana, the Visnudharmottara Mahapurana and other texts mention the Matsyas or the Matsya kingdom.
- With their capital at Viratnagar, the Matsya country corresponded roughly to the former state of Jaipur in Rajasthan. It included the whole of the modern territory of Alwar with a portion of Bhagalpur.

Kurus

- The Kurus formed one of the most ancient and prominent of the Indo-Aryan Ksatriya tribes. With their capital at Hastinapur, Kuru country roughly corresponded to the modern Delhi and the adjoining doab region.
- It was the most important kingdom of the later Vedic period, but during the sixth century BCE, the Kurus did not occupy the same position.

Panchala

- The Panchala Mahajanapada was located in the Rohilkhand and parts of Central Doab (modern districts of Bareilly, Badaun, Aligarh etc.).
- The Panchala country was divided into two regions, northern Panchala and southern Panchala. The Mahabharata and the Jatakas bear testimony to this fact. The northern or Uttara-Panchalas had their capital at Ahichchatra (Bareilly district of UP) while southern or Dakshina-Panchalas had Kampilya as their capital.
- Famous city of Kannauj was located in the kingdom of Panchala.
- It had a large army consisting of foot soldiers, men skilful in fight and in the use of steel weapons. Panchalas had become obscure by the 6th century BCE.

Chedi (Cheti)

- The kingdom of the Chedis corresponded roughly to the eastern parts of Bundelkhand and adjoining areas. Its capital was at Sotthivati (Suktimati), probably in Banda district of MP.



- The Chedi formed one of the most ancient tribes among the Ksatriyas in early Vedic times. The country of the Chedi lay near the Yamuna, contiguous to that of the Kurus.
- It was closely connected with the Matsya and Kashi. The Mahabharata gives its Sanskrit name Suktimati or Suktisahvaya.

Surasena

- The Surasenas had their capital at Mathura on the bank of the river Yamuna. Mathura was located at the junction of two famous ancient Indian trade routes i.e. the Uttarapatha and the Dakshinapatha.
- But owing to the weak political structure and varied landscape, the chiefs of this area could not carve out a powerful kingdom.
- The Mahabharata enumerates a number of people in a list which includes the Surasenas along with the Salvas, Kuru-Panchalas and other neighbouring tribes. The Ramayana places Surasena among the northern countries. The Buddhist texts speak of Madhura or Mathura which was the capital of Surasena.

Republics (Gana-Sanghas)

Vajjis (Vrijji)

- It is said to be a confederacy of eight clans (Atthakula) such as Videhas, the Lichchhavis, the Jnatikas, etc. The Videhas had their capital at Mithila. The Lichchhavis had their capital at Vaishali.
- The Vajji territory lay north of the Ganga and stretched as far as the Nepal hills in Bihar. Its western limit was the river Gandak, which separated it from the Malla and Kosalan cities. In the east, it extended up to the banks of the river Koshi and Mahananda.
- In all likelihood, the Vajji confederation was organised after the decline and fall of the Videhan monarchy and was a republican state at the time of Mahavira and Gautama Buddha.
- Ajatasatru, the Magadhan king is supposed to have destroyed this confederacy.

Mallas

- The territory of the Mallas was divided into two parts, each having its own capital. The two capital cities were Kushinara (identified with Kasia in the Gorakhpur district), and Pava (modern Padrauna).
- These two cities are of much importance in both Buddhism and Jainism. Buddha took his last breath at Kusinagara, whereas Mahavira at Pawapuri.

Asmaka (Assaka)

- The kingdom of Assaka (Asmaka) was situated near the river Godavari with its capital at Patali or Potna in present Maharashtra.
- The Buddhist texts contain occasional references to this mahajanapada. The Anguttara Nikaya says that it had an abundance of food and gems and was wealthy and prosperous. It became commercially important in the course of time.



Republics and Monarchies

Republics (Gana-Sanghas)

The compound term Gana-Sangha has a connotation of Gana – those claiming equal status and Sangha (an assembly). The kingdoms or the monarchies generally practised orthodox traditions, but the gana-sanghas practised more or less egalitarian traditions at least among the ruling clans. Some gana-sanghas consisted of a single clan, such as the Shakyas, Koliyas, and Mallas while others had many clans, such as Vrijjis and Vrishnis.

Some of the characteristics of gana-sanghas are:

Location

- Spread in the foothills of the Himalayas and in the North-west India, they generally occupied the hilly and less fertile areas. But agriculture was the main source of income of the gana-sanghas of the Indo-Gangetic Plain.
- They were mainly concentrated in wet rice producing areas. Cattle rearing was not a much important occupation except in the areas of Punjab and Doab.
- The gana-sanghas ruled over a small geographical area. Gana-Sangha can be seen as a proto state.

Polity

- The heads of families of a clan governed the territory through an assembly. In some cases, a few clans formed a confederacy, where the chiefs of all the clans constituted an assembly to govern the territory of the confederate clans. Other members of the communities had no right of governance.
- The actual procedure of governance involved the meeting of the assembly, located in a main city. The assembly used to put a matter to an elaborate discussion to come to a decision. On the non resolution of the matter after discussion, the issue was put to vote and the opinion of the majority was taken into consideration.
- The assembly was presided over by the head of the clan. This office was not hereditary. There were members to assist the head of clan in carrying out administrative functions such as treasurers, commanders etc.
- The gana-sanghas with their egalitarian character were less opposed to individualistic and independent opinion than the kingdoms and were more ready to tolerate unorthodox views.
- Criminals had to face an elaborate judicial process from a hierarchy of officials.
- However, the pattern of government followed by the gana-sanghas was not that of a democracy, but that of an oligarchy as power was vested in the hands of ruling families.

Society

- Since power was diffused in gana-sanghas unlike that of kingdoms, the stratification of society was limited and ramifications of administration and coercive authority was not extensive.
- The Gana-sanghas had two strata:
 - The Kshatriya rajakula or ruling families, and
 - The dasa-karmakara or the slaves and labourers.