



315en05

## FROM JANAPADAS TO EMPIRE

In the last chapter we studied how later Vedic people started agriculture in the Ganga basin and settled down in permanent villages. In this chapter, we will discuss how increased agricultural activity and settled life led to the rise of sixteen *Mahajanapadas* (large territorial states) in north India in sixth century BC. We will also examine the factors, which enabled Magadh one of these states to defeat all others to rise to the status of an empire later under the Mauryas. The Mauryan period was one of great economic and cultural progress. However, the Mauryan Empire collapsed within fifty years of the death of Ashoka. We will analyse the factors responsible for this decline. This period (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) is also known for the rise of many new religions like Buddhism and Jainism. We will be looking at the factors responsible for the emergence of these religions and also inform you about their main doctrines.



### OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to

- explain the material and social factors (e.g. growth of agriculture and new social classes), which became the basis for the rise of *Mahajanapada* and the new religions in the sixth century BC;
- analyse the doctrine, patronage, spread and impact of Buddhism and Jainism;
- trace the growth of Indian polity from smaller states to empires and list the sixteen *Mahajanapadas*;
- examine the role of Ashoka in the consolidation of the empire through his policy of *Dhamma*;
- recognise the main features— administration, economy, society and art under the Mauryas and
- Identify the causes of the decline of the Mauryan empire.

### 5.1 THE EMERGENCE OF NEW RELIGIONS

In this period, the centre of economic and political activity shifted from Haryana and western UP to Eastern UP and Bihar, which had more rainfall and better fertility of land. As it was now easier to exploit the iron ore resources of Bihar and adjoining regions, people started using more and more iron tools and ploughshare to clear thick forest cover and cultivate the hard soil of this area.





## Notes

The evidence of the growth of agriculture comes from the archaeological and literary sources of this period. In fact, a ploughshare dated to around 500 BC has been found from Jakhera in Etah district in western U.P. Many other important pieces of evidence of the use of iron in this period come from Rajghat, Kaushambi, Vaishali and Sonpur. The Buddhist texts tell us how cultivation of paddy, sugarcane and mustard required utmost care and several rounds of ploughing. Expansion of agriculture resulted in improved food supply and helped in the development of craft production, trade and urban centres.

The sixth century BC is known as an era of 'Second Urbanisation' in the Indian Subcontinent. After the decline of the Harappan Towns urban centres now emerge again after a gap of more than a thousand years. However, this time towns developed in the middle Ganga basin and not in the Indus plain. It is said that more than sixty towns and cities such as Pataliputra, Rajagriha, Sravasti, Varanasi, Vaishali, Champa, Kaushambi and Ujjaini developed between 600 and 300 BC. These cities became centre of craft production and trade, and were inhabited by a large number of artisans and merchants. The goods produced by artisans like textile, silk, jewellery, pottery etc, were carried by merchants to other towns. Varanasi was a major centre of trade connected with Sravasti and Kaushambi. Sravasti was also connected with Vaishali through Kapilavastu and Kusinara. *Jataka* stories tell us that traders travelled from Magadh and Kosala via Mathura to Taxila. Mathura was the transit point for travel to Ujjain and coastal areas of Gujarat also.

Development of trade is reflected in the discovery of thousands of coins known as punch marked coins (PMC). Various kind of marks such as crescent, fish, trees, hill etc. are punched on these coins, they are therefore called Punched Marked Coins. Numismatists have identified nearly 550 types of such coins, made mainly of silver and sometimes copper.

The improvement in agriculture and development of trade, money and urbanisation had an impact on the society as well. Indeed, due to these changes traditional equality and brotherhood gave way to inequality and social conflict. People wanted some kind of reprieve from new social problems like violence, cruelty, theft, hatred, and falsehood. Therefore, when new religions such as Jainism and Buddhism preached the concept of peace and social equality, people welcomed it. These religions emphasised that true happiness does not lie in material prosperity or performance of rituals but in charity, frugality, non-violence, and good social conduct. Besides, the general economic progress had led to the rise of vaisyas and other mercantile groups, who wanted better social position than what brahmanas gave them. Therefore, they preferred to patronise non-vedic religions like Buddhism and Jainism through substantial donations.

Buddhism and Jainism were not the only religions, which challenged brahmanical dominance. According to the Buddhist sources, more than 62 sects and philosophies flourished in this period. One of these sects was known as Ajivika, which was founded by Makkhali Goshal. Ajivakas were very popular in Magadh in the third century BC and Mauryan kings donated several caves in the honour of Ajivaka monks.



## INTEXT QUESTION 5.1



Notes

1. Name those places where the evidence of iron tools during 6<sup>th</sup> BC has been found.  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Describe some important trade routes and trade centres of this period.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why were early coins called punch marked coins?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Who was the founder of the Ajivika sect?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 5.2 DOCTRINES OF JAINISM AND BUDDHISM

**Jainism**

Vardhaman Mahavira, is regarded as the founder of Jainism. He was born in 599 BC near Vaishali in Bihar. He was twenty-fourth and the last *tirthankara* of Jainism. Jainism believed that the main goal of human life is the purification of soul and attainment of *nirvana*, which means freedom from birth and death. This can be achieved not through rituals and sacrifices but by pursuance of *triratna* and *panchamahavrata*. *Triratna* or three jewels are right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct, which can lead to liberation. Right conduct means observance of five great vows: *ahimsa* (do not commit violence) *satya vachana* (do not speak a lie), *asteya* (do not steal), *brahmacharya* (do not indulge in sexual act) and *aprigraha* (do not acquire property). Householders were expected to observe milder form of the practice of these virtues called *anuvrata* (small vows) in comparison to the monks. So, one can notice that while the Brahmanism was a ritual oriented religion this new faith was conduct-oriented.

The most distinguishing feature of Jainism was the concept of *anekantavada* or *syadavada*. It means that the truth can be viewed from *aneka* or various angles. Another important feature of Jainism was its emphasis on extreme form of penance, austerity, and strict non-violence Perhaps emphasis on strict discipline was one of the reasons why it could not attract the masses in large number. Mahavira used Prakrit language to spread his message. However, just like other religions, Jainism also could not remain united for very long and later divided into two sects called the Digambara (who remain naked) and Svetambara (who wear white clothes).

**Buddhism**

The founder of Buddhism was Gautama Buddha, who was born in 566 BC at Lumbini, located in the foothills of Nepal. One night he left his palace in search of truth and ultimately attained the true knowledge at Bodhgaya. He then began to be called Buddha or the enlightened one. He delivered his first sermon at Sarnatha near Varanasi. This event is known as *dharmachakra-pravartana* (turning of the wheel of law). He also established his *sangha* here. He died at the age of 80 in 486 B.C. at Kusinara or Kusinagar near Gorakhpur in eastern UP.

Buddha asked his followers to avoid the two extremes of indulgence in worldly pleasure and the practice of strict abstinence and asceticism. This philosophy of *madhyama marga* or the Middle Path is reflected in all the issues related to Buddhism. The main



**Notes**

teachings of Buddhism are encapsulated in the basic concept of four noble truths or *arya satya* and eightfold path or *astangika marga*. The first noble truth, Buddha said that suffering (*dukkha*) is the essence of the world and is like an ocean of miseries. Second noble truth is *dukkha samudya* i.e. every suffering has a cause. Third noble truth is *dukkha nirodha* i.e. suffering could be extinguished and fourth *dukkha nirodha gamini pratipada* i.e. there is a path leading to the extinction of *dukkha*. He said that every thing in this world like birth, old age and death leads to suffering. If one wants to get rid of suffering one has to conquer the desire. This removal of desire can be achieved through eight fold path, these are: right faith, right resolve, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right thought, right self concentration.

Buddha used Pali language spoken by masses to propagate his teachings. Buddha allowed lower varnas and women to join the *sangha*. Four Buddhist councils organised over different periods played a significant role in the propagation of Buddhism. In the fourth council during the reign of Kanishka, Buddhism split into two major sects called Hinayana and Mahayana. Mahayana adopted Sanskrit as its language and started worshipping Buddha in the form of an idol, while Hinayana continued to follow Pali and treated Buddha as a guide.

Buddhism became weak by seventh century AD but the impact of Buddhism can be seen in all spheres of life in Indian history. Buddhist scholars created many literary texts like *Tripitaka*, *Milindapanho*, *Buddhacharita* etc. Buddhism became an inspiration for the promotion of art and architecture, in the form of stupas, rock cut caves and paintings. These can be noticed at Sanchi, Bharhut, Amravati, Ajanta etc. Buddhism inspired Gandhara and Mathura schools of art. Buddhism by opening its door to all the classes challenged the superiority of Brahmanism and gave better social position to lower castes.



**INTEXT QUESTION 5.2**

1. What are the three elements of the Jaina doctrine of *triratna*?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What are the two sects of Jainism called?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Where did Buddha deliver his first sermon?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What are the four noble truths and eightfold path in Buddhism?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What did Buddha say about *dukkha*?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Buddha used which language to preach his words?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How are Mahayana and Hinayana different?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What are the contributions of Buddhism in field of literature and art?  
\_\_\_\_\_



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### 5.3 THE SIXTEEN MAHAJANPADAS

The sixth century BC was not only a period of socio-economic and religious development but it also witnessed new political developments. In the later Vedic period, as we have seen earlier, people had started agriculture, which made them settle down at a particular place. These permanent settlements led to foundation of *janapadas* or territorial states under the control of the king. In the sixth century BC the main area of political activity gradually shifted from Western UP to Eastern UP and Bihar. This region was not only fertile on account of better rainfall and river systems but was also closer to iron production centres. The use of better iron tools and weapons enabled some territorial states to become very large and they came to be called *mahajanapadas*. Most of them were situated north of Vindhya, between Bihar in the east to the northwest frontier of the subcontinent. The list of these sixteen *mahajanapadas* is given below.

**Table 5.1**  
**The Mahajanpadas**

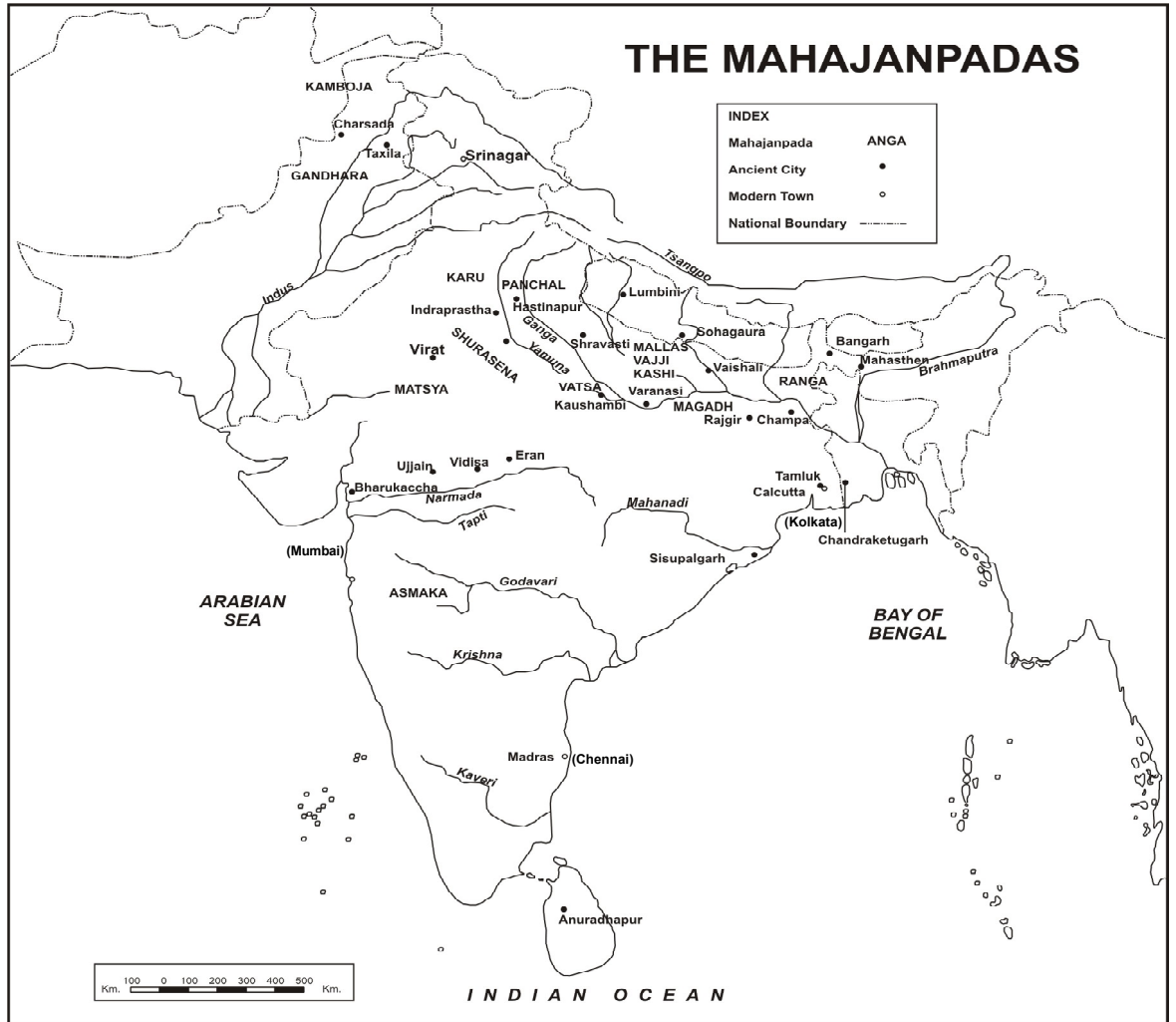
Most of these states were monarchical in nature but some of them, called *ganasangha*, had an oligarchical system of governance. In this system unlike monarchies, where a hereditary king rules, administration was run by an elected king with the help of a large council or assemblies comprising heads of all important clans and families. This system was certainly more democratic than monarchy, though the common man had no participation in the administration. The most important of these

Sl. No.	Mahajanapadas	Capital	Modern location
1	Anga	Champa	Munger and Bhagalpur
2	Magadh	Girivraja / Rajagir	Gaya and Patna
3	Kasi	Kasi	Banaras
4	Vatsa	Kausambi	Allahabad
5	Kosala	Sravasti	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
6	Saurasena	Mathura	Mathura
7	Panchala	Ahichchatra and Kampilya	Western Uttar Pradesh
8	Kuru	Indraprastha	Merrut and S.E. Haryana
9	Matsya	Viratnagar	Jaipur
10	Chedi	Sothivati / Banda	Bundelkhanda
11	Avanti	Ujjain / Mahismati	Madhya Pradesh & Malwa
12	Gandhar	Taxila	Rawalpindi
13	Kamboj	Pooncha	Rajori & Hajra (Kashmir)
14	Asmaka	Pratisthan / Paithan	Bank of Godavari
15	Vajji	Vaishali	Vaishali
16	Malla	Kusinara	Deoria & U.P.



**Notes**

states was that of Vajjis with their capital at Vaishali, which was ruled by the Lichchhavis. These oligarchies mainly existed in the foothills of the Himalayas. They were gradually defeated and conquered by the Magadhan Empire.



Map 5.1 The Mahajanapadas



**INTEXT QUESTION 5.3**

1. Name any four mahajanapadas of the sixth century BC.  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. How *Ganasangha* different from monarchies?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Which was the most important ganasangha state in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC?  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Notes

## 5.4 THE RISE OF MAGADH

The political fight among these *mahajanapadas* led ultimately to one of them namely Magadh to emerge as the most powerful state and the centre of a vast empire. The earliest important ruler of Magadh was the king Bimbisara, who ruled for 52 years from 544 BC to 492 BC. He pursued a three-pronged policy, namely, matrimonial alliances, friendship with strong rulers and conquest of weak neighbours to expand the empire. Under the policy of matrimonial alliances, he married the sister of Prasenjit, the king of Kosala. She brought in dowry the territory of Kashi, which yielded a revenue of 1,00,000 coins. The control over Kasi and friendship with Prasenajit allowed Magadh to concentrate on other areas. His other wives were daughters of the chiefs of Lichchavi and Madra (middle Punjab) respectively. He also conquered Anga by defeating its ruler Brahmadata. Anga and specially its capital Champa were important for the inland and maritime trade. Thus, Kashi and conquest of Anga became the launching pad for the expansion of Magadh. He was a contemporary of both Buddha and Mahavira and paid equal respect to them. It seems that he was either killed or forced to commit suicide by his son Ajatasatru, who was eager to take over the throne himself.

Ajatasatru was an aggressive person and first came into conflict with his maternal uncle Prasenajit, who was aggrieved by the treatment meted out to Bimbisara. He asked Ajatasatru to return the territory of Kasi, which was given to his mother in dowry. Ajatasatru refused and it was only after a fierce battle Prasenajit agreed to leave Kasi with Magadh. Similarly he fought with his maternal grandfather Chetak, the chief of Vaishali and after 16 long years of war Ajatasatru succeeded in breaking the might of Vaishali. Therefore, he not only retained Kasi, but also added Vaishali to Magadh.

Ajatasatru was succeeded by Udayin and his main contribution was building a fort on the confluence of river Ganga and river Son at Pataliputra or Patna. It was strategically a significant step as this site was not only centrally located but also allowed easy movement of merchant and soldiers.

Udayin was succeeded by the dynasty of Shishunaga. The most important achievement of Shishunaga was to defeat Avanti (Malwa) and make it a part of Magadh. The successor of Sisunaga was his son Kalashoka. It was during his rule the second Buddhist council was held.

The Shishunaga dynasty was succeeded by the kings of the Nanda dynasty. Mahapadma Nanda was its most important ruler. According to the Brahmanical texts he belonged to a low caste or at least a non-kshatriya caste. He possessed a large army and added Kalinga to his empire. The last Nanda king was Dhannanand. He is believed to be an arrogant and oppressive ruler who imposed heavy taxes on the common man. It made them quite unpopular among the masses and ultimately Chandragupta took advantage of this public resentment and uprooted the Nanda rule and set up the Mauryan Empire.

The question is how Magadh could establish gradually its dominance over all other states of the period. Magadh certainly benefited from numerous able and ambitious rulers, but its strength was based primarily on certain geographical factors. Its earlier capital Girivraja or Rajagir was surrounded by five hills, which helped it to provide natural fortification. Secondly, its fertile river plain provided a vast amount of agricultural surplus, which was essential for raising a vast standing army. Forests in southern areas gave it timber and elephants. Magadh had another advantage in its control over iron deposits found very near south Bihar. Such access to iron made Magadhan weapons far superior and agriculture tools more productive. It was this material background which helped Magadh to become more powerful than other *mahajanapadas*.