

**W**e choose our own leaders or rulers today by voting. It has become common during the last sixty years or so. Ruler is an elected representative and actual power is held by the people. About 3500–3000 years ago, the rajas were also chosen by the jana, the people, this way. This was early Vedic age. In the later Vedic age (3000–2600 years ago), the rajas became hereditary.

### How some Rulers Became Powerful

Around 3000–2600 years ago a new method was adopted to become a powerful king and called as *maharaja* or *samrat*. It was through performing a very big sacrifice, called *ashvamedha yajna* or horse sacrifice. In this ritual, a royal horse was set free, to run for the whole year. The horse was **followed by a band of chosen warriors** to get control of territories it, had covered. If the horse wandered into the kingdoms of other *rajas* and they stopped it they had to fight. They might have to pay a heavy price, as well as contribute slaves and bring gifts to the *yajna*. And if they allowed the horse to pass, it meant that they accepted that the raja who wanted to perform the sacrifice was stronger than them. The *raja* who organised the *yajna* was recognised as being very powerful and all other *rajas* brought gifts for him. Then, the king was called the *Samrat* or Emperor.

The emperor to be, was the central figure in these rituals of sacrifice. Priests performed the rituals including the sprinkling of sacred water on the king. His charioteer chanted tales of his bravery and victories in the battles. The ordinary people, the vish or *vaishya*, also brought gifts. However, some people were excluded from many rituals.

#### Varnas

In the early Vedic period, it was easy to describe people by their occupations. In the later Vedic period, the priests divided people into four groups, called *varnas*. According to them each varna had a different set of functions or duties or occupations. The priests later said that these groups were decided on the basis of birth. The *varna* system gradually became very rigid.

The first *varna* was that of the *brahmins* or *brahmanas*. They were expected to study the Vedas, perform sacrifices and receive gifts (*dakshina*). The second *varna* was that of the *kshatriyas* or the rulers and warriors. They were expected to fight battles and protect people. Third were the *vish* or the *vaishyas*. They were expected to be farmers, herders and traders. Both the *kshatriyas* and *vaishyas* could take part in sacrifices. The *kshatriyas* and *vaishyas* could also study the Vedas.

The fourth *varna* was of *shudras*. Not much information is available about them. They were mostly labourers. Some of them were craftsperson. Some were hunter-gatherers.

However, many people did not accept the *varna* system laid down by the priests. Some kings thought themselves superior to the priests. Many thinkers, out and among the priests opposed the grouping by birth or occupation. But a large part of the people could not oppose due to the high position and influence of the priests in the kings' court.

### Janapadas

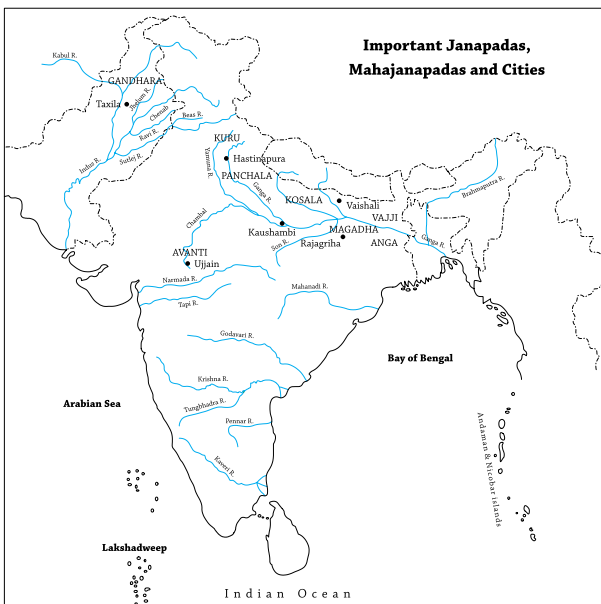
The leaders of some groups were, in the later Vedic period, called *rajas* or kings. As a result of rituals and sacrifices, the leadership had also become hereditary. With the rise in the number of clans (groups), the kingdoms were named after the ruling clan. Each clan occupied some major area, separated from the other clan. The land where these clans, tribes or janas set foot and settled down were known literally as *janapadas*.



Painted grey ware


Archaeological excavations reveal that there existed janapadas in the areas, such as Purana Qila in Delhi, Hastinapur near Meerut, Atranjikhhera near Etah in Uttar Pradesh. The archaeologists have found out how the people lived in huts, tended cattle and other animals. They also grew a variety of crops— rice, wheat, barley, pulses, sugarcane, mustard and sesame. Remember that sugarcane was not grown by the Harappans

and early Vedic people. The people of *janapadas* also made earthen pots known as **Painted Grey ware** as they were grey in colour and had painted designs (usually simple lines and geometric patterns).



### Mahajanapadas

By the later vedic age, the Aryans had moved further into the Ganga Valley, clearing the thick forests by use of iron implements with greater ease. In time, some of the *janas* grew in size and power and they settled in the land which was called as *janapadas* (literally meaning foothold of tribe). Gradually, many *janapadas* became larger by capturing more and more land. Some *janapadas* became more powerful and richer than others. These came to be known as *mahajanapadas* (from Sanskrit, maha meaning great).



About 2500 years ago, there were sixteen *mahajanapadas*. Some of these are shown in the map. Most *mahajanapadas* had a **capital** city, many of these capitals were **fortified**. This means that huge walls of wood, brick or stones were built around these capital cities. The kings wanted to show their riches and power and protect themselves from attack, by making huge and tall walls around their capital cities. Building such walls required great planning including lakhs of bricks, thousands of labour, money and other resources.

Besides building huge forts, **the new type of rajas** began maintaining big armies. Soldiers were paid regular salaries in punch marked coins.

### Taxes

The *rajas* of the *janapadas* depended on the occasional gifts brought by people. But, the rulers of the *mahajanapadas* required more resources to build huge forts, maintain big armies and pomp and show. So, they employed officials (called *amatyas*) to collect regular taxes in the form of cash or kind :

- 1/6 th bhaga or share of the crops produced from the farmers,
- animals and animal produce from the herders,
- one day work for the king every month by the craftspersons,
- taxes on goods, bought and sold, from the traders,
- part of forest produce like hides, fruits, gums, resin from the hunters and gatherers.


Agriculture was the main source of revenue for the state. Later, this barter system changed and coins of copper, silver, gold were issued by the state. Then the taxes were collected in cash.

### Increased Production of the Crops

Around this time the use of iron ploughshares increased. They can turn over the heavy, clayey soil better than with a wooden ploughshare. It helped to grow more grains. People also began transplanting paddy. Saplings of paddy were grown without much space between them. Then they were planted in the fields with more space in between. The process is called transplantation of paddy. This led to increased production as many more plants survived than just by scattering the seeds on the ground. However, transplantation of paddy is a back-breaking work. So, generally slave men (*das*) and women (*dasi*) and landless labourers (*kammakaras*) were engaged in this work. The kings also encouraged the use of iron ploughshares and slaves and labourers as they needed more resources for their own expenses and the increasing population.

### Case Study—Magadha

Magadha was a part of the present-day Bihar. Magadha became the most rich and powerful in about two hundred years. The reasons for this development were as follow :

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- (a) The rivers Ganga and Son flowing through Magadha made its soil fertile, gave water whole year and were important waterways. The traders travelled in big boats up to the sea through Ganga and then along the coast to south India. They went with silks, muslins, etc. and returned with spices and gems (jewels) very much in demand in the North.
  - (b) Big forests of Magadha provided wood for building houses, carts and chariots. Elephants from the forests were captured and trained for joining the army.
  - (c) Abundant iron ores were present in Magadha. Iron was obtained from them to make strong tools and weapons.

Magadha had two very powerful rulers, **Bimbisara** and **Ajatasattu** (Ajatashatru in Sanskrit). They conquered other *janapadas* by every means. The capital of Magadha was **Rajagriha** (present-day Rajgir in Bihar). Later Ajatasattu shifted the capital to **Pataliputra**, situated at the junctions of the rivers Ganga, Sarayu and Son to facilitate his wars of conquests. Thus, Pataliputra had a natural barrier of rivers to protect itself from invasions. The old books mention how Ajatasattu used two new weapons in his wars — a catapult and a covered chariot with swinging mace. Mace was a very big and heavy iron ball with sharp points on a metal stick. The swinging mace can be compared with a modern tank in its destroying power.

The successors of Ajatasattu were weak. **Mahapadma Nanda** was another important ruler. He extended his control upto the north-west part of the subcontinent. **Chandragupta Maurya** conquered Magadha and established the Mauryan dynasty.

In 326 BCE, a Greek ruler named Alexander who wanted to conquer the world, also invaded India from the north-west. His soldiers refused to cross the river Beas. They were scared of the might of the Magadha that had vast armies of foot soldiers, chariots and elephants. Alexander had to turn back and proceed in the other direction, towards Asia Minor.

### **Case Study – Vajji, an Early Republic**

While Magadha was the most powerful and rich kingdom, Vajji was the most powerful and rich *gana* or sangha; *Gana* means group and sangha means organisation. In a *gana* or *sangha* there were not one, but many rulers, each one known as a *raja*. These *rajās* performed rituals together. They met in assemblies, discussed, debated and decided the matters of war, administration and other issues of common interest.

The main *sanghas* were *Lichchhavis*, *Mallas*, etc. Vajji was a confederation of 9 clans of which *Lichchhavis* were the most powerful. Eminent people were chosen from each of these as representatives (*gana mukhya* or *raja*) to the *Vajji gana parishad* (people's council of *Vajji*). The chairman of the council was called *Ganapramukh* (head of the democracy) but often he was addressed as the king, though his post was not hereditary. The capital of Vajji was the prosperous city **Vaishali**.

### In Other Parts of the World

Around 2500 years ago, the people of Athens in Greece (Europe) set up a form of government, called democracy. It was not a true democracy in today's reference because women and slaves were not considered as citizens. All free men over the age of 30 were recognised as full citizens. All citizens could attend the assembly that met at least 40 times a year. Citizens were expected to serve in the army and the navy. However, appointments for many positions were made through lottery.

### Ajatasattu (Ajatashatru) and the Vajjies

The Buddha told Vassakara, the minister of Ajatasattu that the Vajjies would continue and rule as long as

- They held full and frequent public assemblies.
- They met and acted together.
- They followed established rules.
- They respected, supported and listened to elders.
- Vajji women were not held by force or captured.
- Wise saints of different beliefs were respected.
- Chaityas (local shrines) were maintained in both towns and villages.

– from Digha Nikaya, a famous Buddhist book, written about 2300 years ago.

Mahavira and Buddha both belonged to ganas or sanghas. Rajas of powerful kingdoms tried to conquer the sanghas. Still the ganas or sanghas continued to rule until about 1500 years ago. They were, in essence, democracies. They are called direct democracies. Gupta rulers conquered the last of the ganas or sanghas.

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### Key Words

- » Ritual : a series of actions performed during a religious ceremony as a matter of routine.
- » Samrat : emperor or king of a big mahajanapada.
- » Varna : the caste.
- » Ashvamedha : horse sacrifice.
- » Bhaga : tax on crops, fixed at 1/6th of the produce.
- » Kammakaras : landless labourers.
- » Barter system : exchange of goods for trade without the use of money.
- » Transplantation : planting of saplings.
- » Ganas or Sanghas : a government which had many rulers (rajas).
- » Democracy : a form of government, in which people elected their own ruler.

## Time Line

- |   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| ◆ New kinds of rajas                                    | (about 3000 years ago) |
| ◆ Mahajanapadas   | (about 2500 years ago) |
| ◆ Alexander's invasion, composition of the Digha Nikaya | (about 2300 years ago) |
| ◆ End of the ganas or sanghas                           | (about 1500 years ago) |

## SUMMARY

- ▶ In the later Vedic age (3000–2600 years ago), the rajas became hereditary.
- ▶ Ashwamedha yajna was performed to become a powerful king and called maharaja or samrat.
- ▶ The priests divided people into four groups, called varnas, with a different set of functions or duties as occupations of each.
- ▶ The priests later said that the varnas were decided on the basis of birth.
- ▶ With the rise in the number of clans, the kingdoms were named after the ruling clan.
- ▶ The land where the clans, tribes or janas set foot and settled down were known as janapadas.
- ▶ Some janapadas became larger, more powerful and richer than others. They were called as mahajanapadas.

## Exercise Time

### A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

- Which crop was not grown by the Harappans and early Vedic people ?  
a. Wheat                      b. Rice                      c. Barley                      d. Sugarcane
- In the later Vedic age ploughshares were made of :  
a. stone                      b. iron                      c. wood                      d. bronze
- Which rivers flow through Magadha ?  
a. Satluj and Beas      b. Indus                      c. Ganga and Son                      d. Brahmaputra
- The chairman of Vajji gana parishad was called :  
a. Ganamukhya      b. Gana pramukh      c. Amatya                      d. None of these

### B. Fill in the blanks :

- The \_\_\_\_\_ were to pay taxes in the form of animal produce.
- Magadha had rich deposits of \_\_\_\_\_ ore.
- The new type of Rajas began maintaining big \_\_\_\_\_.
- Magadha had two very powerful rulers, Bimbisara and \_\_\_\_\_.
- Capital of the Vajji gana was \_\_\_\_\_.

### C. Match the following :

- |               |                           |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Sanghas    | a. Horse sacrifice        |
| 2. Jana       | b. Officials or ministers |
| 3. Ashvamedha | c. Organisation           |
| 4. Bhaga      | d. Landless labourers     |
| 5. Amatyas    | e. The people             |
| 6. Kammakaras | f. 1/6th of the crop      |



**D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :**

1. The charioteer sprinkled sacred water on the king in the yajna.
2. Many cities in mahajanapadas were fortified.
3. Rajas of powerful kingdom attempted to conquer the sanghas.
4. There were no iron ores in Magadha.
5. Alexander attacked Magadha.

**E. Define the terms :**

- |                   |              |                    |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| 1. Varna          | 2. Janapada  | 3. Mahajanapada    |
| 4. Gana or Sangha | 5. Democracy | 6. Transplantation |

**F. Answer in one word or one phrase :**

1. Who was the first important ruler of Magadha ?
2. Which was the capital of Bimbisara ?
3. Where in Europe there was a democracy around 2500 years ago ?
4. On what basis the priests decided the varanas ?
5. By what means the production of paddy increased ?

**G. Answer these questions briefly :**

1. Why did the rajas of mahajanapadas build fort ?
2. Outline the reasons for the success of Magadha as a powerful kingdom.
3. What was the taxing pattern set by the rulers of the mahajanapadas ?
4. What were the different set of functions of each varna ?
5. How did the production of crop increase in the later Vedic period ?

**H. Answer these questions in detail :**

1. Describe the preparation and process of ashvamedha yajna.
2. How did the mahajanapadas emerged ? What were the features of the mahajanapadas ?
3. Describe the social, economic and political life in Magadha.
4. Discuss Vajji as an early republic.

**PROJECT WORK**

- Were there any janapadas in your state ? If yes, name them. If not, name the janapadas that would have been the closest to your state and mention whether they were to the east, west, north or south.