

# RISE OF MAGADHA

The period from the 6th century bce in the history of north India witnessed the transition into the early historic phase, marked by the formation of territorial states – both monarchical and non-monarchical – the onset of the second urbanization, and the introduction of metallic currency and a more complex society. North India experienced the emergence of several territorial political entities, known as mahajanapadas. Among the 16 mahajanapadas the monarchical states of Kosala, Vatsa, Avanti, and Magadha, along with the non-monarchical mahajanapada of the Vrijis or Vajjis, attained political prominence by eclipsing other contemporary powers. However, it was the mahajanapada of Magadha which ultimately rose to prominence. The factors that contributed to the rise of Magadha were the strategic locations of its two capitals Rajagriha and Pataliputra, very rich alluvial soil contributing to agricultural surplus production, and the availability of minerals, which resulted in the introduction of iron tools especially for warfare. During this period at Magadha we find three dynasties who contributed to the emergence of Magadha as a superpower: Haryanka, Saisunaga, and the Nanda dynasties.

## **Haryanka Dynasty**

The first important and powerful dynasty in Magadha was the Haryanka dynasty.

### **Bimbisara (558 BC – 491 BC)**

- Son of Bhattiya.
- According to Buddhist chronicles, Bimbisara ruled for 52 years (544 BCE – 492 BCE).
- Contemporary and follower of the Buddha. Was also said to be an admirer of Mahavira, who was also his contemporary.
- Had his capital at Girivraja/Rajagriha (Rajgir).
  - It was surrounded by 5 hills, the openings of which were closed by stone walls on all sides. This made Rajagriha impregnable.
- Also known as Sreniya.
- Was the first king to have a standing army. Magadha came into prominence under his leadership.
- He had a rivalry with Avanti king Pradyota, but later became friends and Bimbisara even sent his royal physician Jivaka to Ujjain, when Pradyota had jaundice.
- He started the practice of using matrimonial alliances to strengthen his political position.
- He had three wives: Kosaladevi (King of Kosala's daughter and the sister of Prasenjit), Chellana (daughter of the Lichchavi chief of Vaisali) and Khema (daughter of the king of Madra, Punjab).
- He followed a policy of conquest and expansion. Most notable conquest by Bimbisara was that of Anga.
- He had an effective and excellent administrative system. The officers occupying high posts were divided into three – executive, military and judicial.

## **Ajatasatru (492 BC – 460 BC)**

- Son of Bimbisara and Chellana.
- He killed his father and became ruler.
- Embraced Buddhism.
- He convened the First Buddhist Council at Rajagriha just after the death of Buddha in 483 BCE.
- Won wars against Kosala and Vaishali.
- Ajatashatru waged a war against Vaishali despite the fact that his mother was a Lichchhavi princess. It took him 16 long years to destroy Vaishali and add it to his empire.
- He used a war engine to throw stones like catapults. He also possessed chariots to which maces were attached which facilitated mass killings.
- The ruler of Avanti tried to invade Magadha and to thwart this danger Ajatashatru began the fortification of Rajagriha. However, the invasion did not materialise during his lifetime.

## **Udayabhadra/Udayin (460 BCE – 444 BCE)**

- Son of Ajatasatru.
- Shifted the capital to Pataliputra (Patna).
- Last of the major Haryanka rulers.
- Udayin's reign is important because he built the fort upon the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Son at Pataliputra. This was done because Patna lay in the centre of the Magadha Kingdom, which now extended from the Himalayas in the north to the hills of the Chotanagpur in the south.
- He was killed at the behest of Palaka, the king of Avanti.
- Succeeded by three kings – Aniruddha, Manda and Nagadasaka.

## **Sisunaga Dynasty**

According to Sri Lankan chronicles, the people of Magadha revolted during the reign of Nagadasaka and placed an amatya (minister) named Sisunaga as king.

### **Sisunaga**

- Was the viceroy of Kasi before becoming king of Magadha.
- The capital was at Girivaraja.
- He annexed Avanti and brought an end to the long rivalry between Magadha and Avanti.
- Later shifted the capital to Vaishali.

### **Kalasoka**

- Son of Sisunaga.
- Kalasoka shifted the capital to Pataliputra.

- He conducted the Second Buddhist Council at Vaishali.
- He was killed in a palace revolution that brought the Nanda dynasty to the throne.

## **Nanda Dynasty**

This was the first non-Kshatriya dynasty. The first ruler was Mahapadma Nanda who usurped the throne of Kalasoka.

### **Mahapadma Nanda**

- He is called the “first historical emperor of India.” (Chandragupta Maurya is the First Emperor of India)
- He murdered Kalasoka to become the king.
- His origins are not clear. As per the Puranas, he was the son of the last Sisunaga king from a Sudra woman. As per some Jain texts and Greek writer Curtius, he was the son of a barber and a courtesan.
- His reign lasted for twenty-eight years from 367 BC to 338 BC.
- He is also called “Sarva Kshatriyantaka” (destroyer of all the Kshatriyas) and “Ekkrat”.
- The empire grew under his reign. It ran from the Kuru country in the north to the Godavari Valley in the south and from Magadha in the east to Narmada on the west.
- He conquered many kingdoms including Kalinga.

### **Dhana Nanda**

- He was the last Nanda ruler.
- He is referred to as Agrammes or Xandrames in Greek texts.
- Alexander invaded North-Western India during his reign, but he could not proceed towards the Gangetic plains because of his army’s refusal.
- He inherited a huge empire from his father. He possessed a standing army of 200,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalry, 3000 elephants and 2000 chariots. He became a powerful ruler because of this.
- He is said to be one of the 8 or 9 sons of Mahapadma Nanda.
- He became unpopular with his subjects owing to an oppressive way of extorting taxes. Also, his Sudra origins and an anti-Kshatriya policy led to a large number of enemies.
- Finally, he was overthrown by Chandragupta Maurya along with Chanakya, which led to the foundations of the Maurya Empire in Magadha.

## **The Causes of rise of the Magadha Empire**

The rise of Magadha as the largest kingdom of that time was a result of continuous effort of several enterprising and ambitious rulers like Bimbisara, Ajatashatru and Mahapadma Nanda. However several other factors can be taken into account for the rapid expansion of Magadha.

### **Geographical Position**

Magadha enjoyed a very advantageous geographical position. Both the capitals, Rajgir and Pataliputra were situated at very strategic points. Rajgir was impregnable as it was surrounded by a group of five hills. Pataliputra was situated at the confluence of the Ganges, the Gandak, and the Son. Their army could move easily towards all direction using the course of these rivers.

### **Fertile lands**

The Gangetic plain was very fertile. Immense agricultural activities could be done to become self sufficient. The environment was suitable for agriculture. Given the heavy rain, the areas could be made more productive even without irrigation.

### **Availability of raw materials**

The availability of timber in the Gangetic plain helped them to manufacture as much boat as required for river transportation. This helped them in easy transportation for both trade and defence. The richest iron deposits were located near to their **first capital Rajgir**. They had enormous scope to use iron ores to equip their army with effective weapons.

### **Rise of towns and use of metal money**

During the Magadha era, most of the towns developed in the mid-Gangetic plains. As a result there was an increased trade and commerce with north-east India. This helped Magadha to impose toll on the sale of commodities and collect huge amount of wealth. Besides this, the use of metal money helped the Magadhan rulers to collect taxes more easily.

### **Large Army**

The large army was another factor in the rise of Magadha. It is said that the Nandas possessed 200,000 infantry, 60,000 cavalry and around 6000 war elephants. No other empire would have the courage to look towards Magadha who maintains such a huge armed force. They were the first rulers to use war elephants. The elephants were made available to them from the eastern part of the country. Elephants could be used to storm fortresses and to march across marshy areas or the areas where there were no roads or other means of transportation.

### **The Society**

The unorthodox character of the Magadhan society played a role in the rise of Magadha. Magadha was inhabited by the Kiratas and Magadhas. Generally, they were held in low esteem by the orthodox brahmanas. However they underwent a happy ethnic admixture with the Vedic people. As a result of such good relationships, the expansion of the kingdom could be easier than the earlier kingdoms who were under vedic influence.