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Prelims Master Program (PMP): 2025-26
Handout 6: Mahajanapada Era

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Political History

(1) Mahajanapadas

This was an era of Mahajanapadas, the great states.

- Earlier Jana (tribe) → Janapada (states) → Mahajanapada (ie big states)

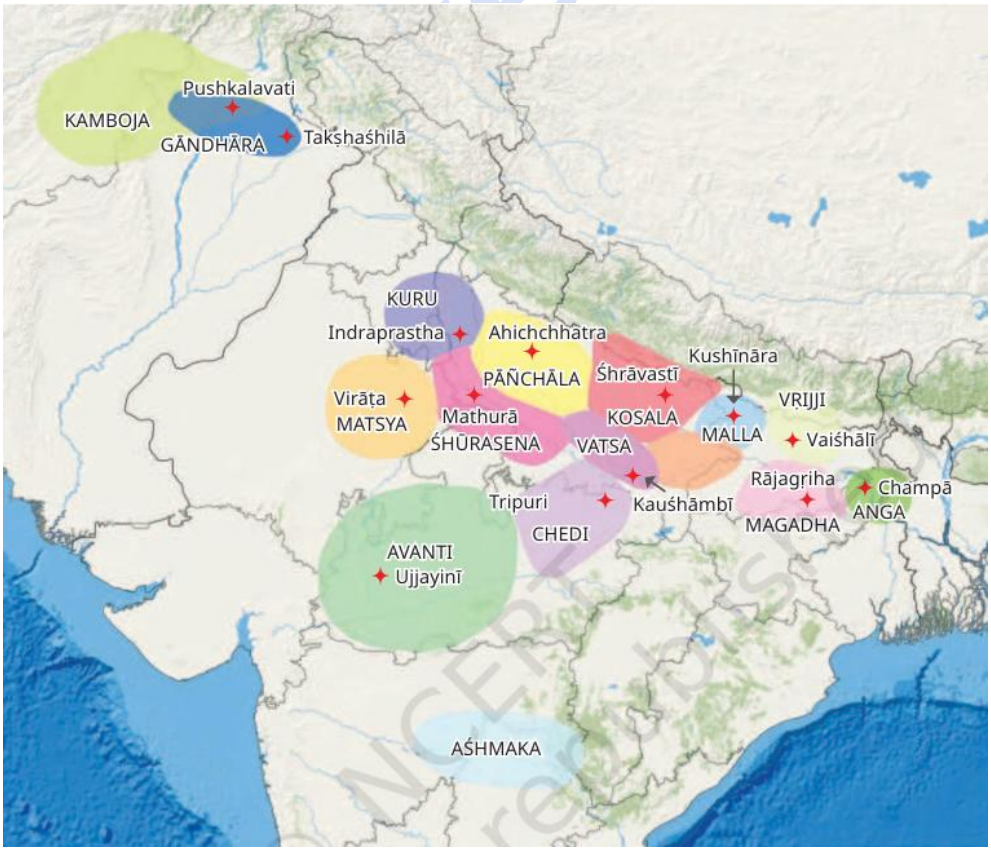
- **Panini** has referred to as many as 22 different janapadas. However, **Anguttara Nikaya** (Buddhist book in Sutta Pitaka) and **Bhagavati Sutra** (Jain book) mention 16 of them.
  - Westernmost – Kamboja and Gandhara
  - Easternmost – Anga
  - Southernmost – Asmaka

Shodasha Mahajanapadas					
	State	**Capital**		**State**	**Capital**
1	Kambhoja	Rajpura/Kapisi	9	Vatsa	Kaushambi (today Kosam near Allahabad)
2	Gandhara	Takshashila	10	Kosala	Sharvasti /Saket/Ayodhya.
3	Kuru	Indraprastha	11	Kashi	Varanasi/Rajghat
4	Panchal	Ahhichata/Kampilya	12	Magadha	Rajgir (Girivraja)/Patliputra
5	Matsya	Viratnagar/Bairat	13	Avanti	Ujjain/Mahishmati
6	Shaursena	Mathura	14	Anga	Champa/Bhagalpur
7	Ashmaka	Potali	15	Vajji	Vaishali
8	Chedi	Suktimati	16	Malla	Pavapuri

Shifting Importance of states:



The period of 6th century BCE in India was a period of transformational changes in the Ganga Valley. This was the period when tribal polities were being consolidated under various state polities. Some of them emerged as **monarchies** while others as **ganarajya**. Thus, there were diverse political structures.



(2) Monarchical State Formation

Later-Vedic Janapada	Post-Vedic Mahajanapada
Janapadas	• Mahajanpadas emerged as most prominent political unit.

King performed royal sacrifices and took grandiose titles.	• King was much **more powerful/ambitious** than earlier.
	• **Pompous titles**: chakravartin, sarvabhauma, Samrat.
	• **New Theories of Kingship:**
	  ○ **Aitareya Brahmana:** Divine Kingship
	  ○ **Buddhist Literature:** Mahasamatta

Sabha and Samiti declined in status and power	• Parishad (Council of Ministers) • Development of **written language.** (Laws, courts too) • A **standing army** and a **permanent bureaucracy** • Amatya, Mahamatras, *Akshapataladhikrita (record keeper)* • **Wars and Battles** were common and destructive

Taxation:
• Bali had become compulsory.
• Shulka/Bhaga.
• Officials like Sannihitri and Bhagaduga
	• First time **detailed reference** to taxation:
	  ▪ **Bali** now became regular tax on agriculture.
	  ▪ Also, **Shulka, Vishthi**
	  ▪ Gradually *all economic activities* came to be taxed.
	• **Tax officers:**
	  ▪ Balisadhaka
	  ▪ Rajjugrahaka: one who measures the land
	  ▪ Dronamapaka: Official who collected tax in grains.
	  ▪ Shaulkika: Officer who collected toll.
	  ▪ Sangrahitri, Koshadhyaksha: Treasurer.
	  ▪ Kammikas: Custom officials.
	  ▪ Additionally, officials like Tundiya and Akasiya

Kula and family	• **Grama/village** was the smallest unit of administration • Grambhojaka, gramini, or gramika: **village headman**

(3) Emergence of "Republics"

Mentioned in **Anguttara Nijaya**, **Ashtadhyayi**, **Mahabharat** and **Arthashastra**.

Lichchhavi (part of Vajji confederacy)	• **Most important** and strongest gana-sangha
	  • In north Bihar, with capital Vaishali.
	• Confederate of 8 clans (**atta-kula**)
	  • Lichchhavi, Videha (Mithila), Vajji, Jnatrika
	• **Governance**: The Lichchhavis had an **assembly** consisting of the heads of Kshatriya families (called as rajas), which met annually.
	  • It had full **financial, administrative, and judicial authority**.
	  • A **ballot system** to decide on important issues.
	  • They also **elected the raja**, who was not a hereditary monarch.
	  • A **council of nine** handled day-to-day administration.
	• During the time of Buddha, the Lichchhavis, under the leadership of **Chetaka**, were the most prominent gana in the Vajji sangha.

	• **Mahavira** was associated with it – Jnatri Clan, suburb of Vaishali.
Shakya	• Capital Kapilavastu • **Buddha** came from here.
Malla	• Kushinagar was the capital • Buddha died here. Today it is a part of Buddhist circuit.

PS: There were other less powerful ganas, such as the Koliyas, Bulis, Kalamas, Moriyas and Bhaggas.

Ancient Democracies? Ancient Indian ganas were not true democracies but **oligarchies** dominated by **Kshatriya aristocracies**, where power rested with a few elite clans. **Participation** was limited to male landowners, excluding women, lower castes, tenant farmers, and labourers. Still, they exhibited **residual egalitarianism**.

In the later era, the Gangasanghas declined. Economically weaker than monarchies, the growth of gana was **stagnated**. They lacked a standing army, making them militarily weaker than monarchies. Internal dissension further undermined them.
Despite their weakness, **ganas managed to survive for centuries.** Greek accounts of **Alexander** mention "autonomous Indians" like Malavas, Kshudrakas, Arjunayas and Yaudheyas. Centuries later, the **Gupta** allied with Lichchhavis.

(4) Persian Invasions

In the 6th c BCE, the Persian kingdom of the Achaemenids emerged as a major empire. **Kings Cyrus** led an expedition to the **northwest frontier** in India. **Darius, I** (r. 520-486 BCE) conquered parts of **Punjab** in the year 518.B.C. The river **Indus** thus became the border of the Persian empire.

The effects of Persian invasions:

- **Political Impact:** The **direct impact** of the invasions was **felt only on the borders** of India. However, the **indirect impact** (ideas, etiquettes, nobles, soldiers) must have been noticeable.
- **Other Impact:**
  - The Persian **coinage system** possibly influenced Indian coins.
  - **Kharoshti script** was derived from Aramaic used in Persia.
  - Mauryan **royal roads** were influenced by Persian Highways.
  - **Monuments and palaces** during the Mauryan period (?)

The mutual **trade relationship eventually encouraged Greeks to launch invasion** over India.

(5) Rise of Magadha

Magadha was ruled by a total of **six dynasties** namely:

Mahajanapada Era			**Mauryan Era**	**Post-Mauryan Era**	
Haryanka Dynasty (544-413 BCE)	**Shishunag** Dynasty (413-345)	**Nanda** Dynasty (345-322 BCE)	Mauryan Dynasty (322-185 BCE)	Shunga Dynasty (185-73 BCE)	Kanva Dynasty (73-28 BCE)
Bimbisara, Ajatshatru		Mahapadmananda, Dhanananda			

Some of the reasons/factors behind the rise of Magadha Mahajanpada:

(a) Geo-Economic Factors: (material factors)

- **Defendable capitals**
  - Girivraja was surrounded by hills on five sides.
  - Patliputra was surrounded by Ganga, Son, Gandak and Ghaghra Rivers.
- **Strong resource base**
  - Fertile alluvial land
  - Riverine navigation → commercial income
- **Forest and Mineral Resources**
  - Timber and elephants
  - Mines – copper and iron
- **Military technology**



Rajgir hills fortifications.

(b) Ideological factors:

- There was comparatively more inclusion and mobility due to less enforcement of varnadharma.
- Jainism and Buddhism also abjured violence and animal sacrifice; thus, cultivators were able to preserve their animal wealth which improved productivity and led to prosperity.

(c) Role of ambitious kings of Magadha:

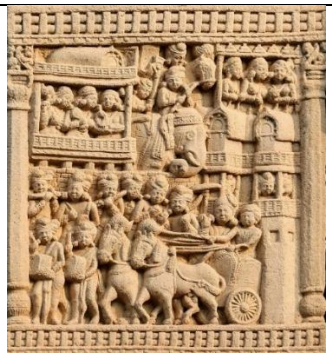
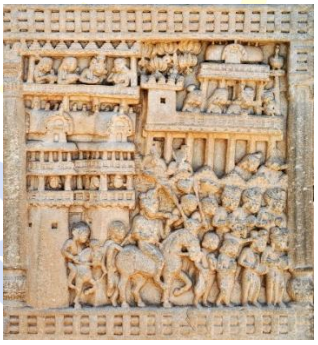
- **Bimbisara**: (Haryana dynasty)
  - Efficient **reorganization of kingdom** (gram bhojakas assembly, **standing army**)
  - Expansion through **military conquest** (Victory over Champa, the capital of **Anga**)
  - Expansion through three **Matrimonial alliances**:
    - **Kashi** was received in *dowry* when he married **Koshaladevi** (sister of Prasenjit of Koshala who had earlier conquered it).
    - He also married **Chellana** from **Vajji confederacy**, a sister of Chetaka.
    - His third wife was **Khema**, daughter of **Madra** in Punjab.
  - **Diplomatic efforts:** he also befriended the following rulers.
    - Helped the ruler of **Avanti**, **Chandrapradyot** in ailment.
    - Befriended the ruler of **Taxila**, **Pushkashirin**.
- **Ajatshatru**
  - He killed his father Bimbisara. Then he **forced Prasenjit of Kosala** to give his daughter in marriage and also **Kashi** again as a dowry.
  - **Military Expansions**
    - **Gana sangha**: he waged a long war with **Vajji**.
    - Then the next target was **Kosala state itself**.



Fig. 5.12. Nanda Empire

- He was a follower of Jainism but **embraced Buddhism**, convened 1st Buddhist Assembly at Rajgir. (His **son Udayin** shifted capital to **Pataliputra**)

- **Shishunaga:**
  - **Conquest of Avanti:** After a bitter **rivalry lasting for many decades**, Magadha under Shishunaga broke the resistance of Avanti power, and completely annexed it.
  - **Transfer of Capital:** He later transferred the capital to Magadha to **Vaishali**.
    - Under **Kalashoka**, son of Shishunaga, the **2nd Buddhist council** was convened here. Later, the capital was shifted back to Pataliputra.
- **Mahapadmananda** (title *Ekrat*): He annexed **Kalinga**.
- **Dhanananda:** He kept his empire intact and possessed a powerful army. However, his oppressive rule and tax policy was resented by the people.
  - His reign saw **Alexander's invasion**.

		
Royal procession of Ajatshatru leaving Rajagriha (Sanchi Stupa)	Ajatashatru worships the Buddha (Bharhut Stupa)	Procession of Prasenajit of Kosala leaving Shravasti to meet the Buddha (Sanchi)

Economic Changes

(1) Agrarian Economy:

- **Expansion of agriculture**: Middle Ganga basin forest was cleared with the help of fire and iron implements.
- **Agricultural Technology**
  - Paddy transplantation
  - Iron ploughshare
  - Ashtadhyayi mentions multiple crops/year
- **Organization**
  - **Larger size of farm-holdings**: Emergence of big landlords: **Grahapatis/Gahapatis**
  - **Slaves** (dasas), **labourers** (kammakaras) employed

Thus, the overall impact was a **larger agrarian surplus**.



Sanchi stupa panel depicting a smithy, where different workers bring firewood, water, stoke the fire, beat the iron, etc.

(2) Development of Crafts:

- **Three developments**
    1. Proliferation
    2. Craft Specialization
    3. Localization
- Examples:
    1. **Iron:** became better in quality, diverse in application, more easily available and part of daily life.
    2. **Burnt bricks** made a comeback after a gap of a few centuries.
    3. **NBPW** pottery: luxury ware.

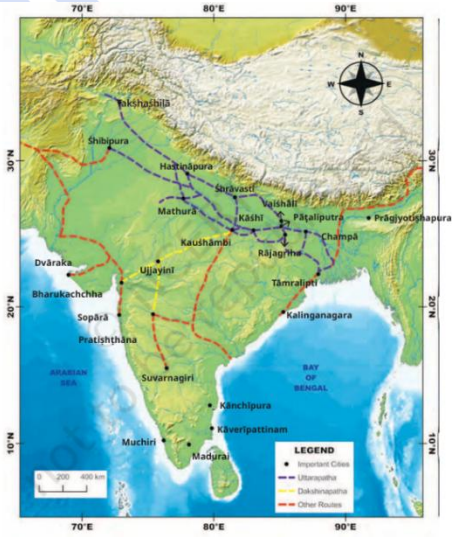


NBPW

(3) Trade & Commerce:

Internal Trade Routes	Foreign Trade
• **Uttarapath**: Taxila to Tamralipti port. • **Dakshinapath**: Mathura-Ujjain-Bharuch/Sopara. • Transported over long distances by **sarthavahas**	• Both **maritime** and **land** routes were used in foreign trade. • **Takshashila** was linked to Central Asia • **Bengal** was linked to Burma.

(4) Guilds/Shreni:



- These were associations of *merchants* or *craftsmen* in the same trade.
- They used to **elect** their **heads**:
    - Sreshthi/**Setthi**/Mahasetthi for merchants and traders
    - **Jetthaka/pamukkha** for craftsmen
    - **Sarthavaha** for caravan
- They performed various **functions**:
    - Regulation of standards, protected members from competition, training of apprentices, hiring security for to protect their cargo.
    - Setting of prices, Bargaining power with the customers/state
    - Professional code of duties and obligations (internal laws) to maintain discipline, they had authority to punish and expel corrupt members.
    - They could own property, also functioned as bank, minted coins, gave loans or donations, including to temples/sanghas and educational institutions.
- They enjoyed royal patronage and autonomy. In exchange, they facilitated tax collection and helped in the regulation of industry/trade.
- Shrenis thus played a crucial role in promoting urbanization, craft specialization, and long-distance trade across regions.

(5) Money Economy:



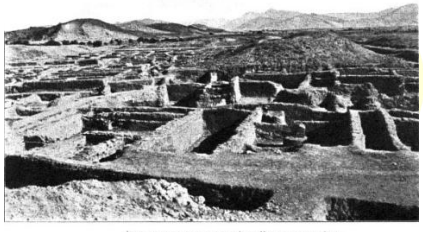
- **Punch Marked Coins** (**karshapana**) represent the *first* currency system of the Indian subcontinent.
    - Generally made of **silver**. Sometime **copper** or **mixed** silver and copper.
- Pieces of metal were punched with certain marks/symbols, such as a hill, tree, fish, bull, elephant, and crescent.
- They carry no inscription identifying the *issuing authority*, date/year of minting. There are no royal portraits.
- The **Pali texts** indicate plentiful use of money and show that coins were used to pay wages and buy goods.

(6) Second Urbanisation:

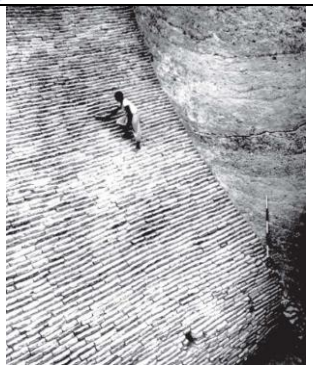
- The **rise of the mahajanapadas** was directly connected with the **emergence of the early urban centres** of the Gangetic plains in the period after 600 BC.
- **Literary Evidence:**
    - Term ***Nagar*** first time comes up in the Later Vedic era in **Taittariya Aranyaka**.
    - **Buddhist sources** mention 60 towns and 6 large town (Rajgriha, Champa, Kashi, Shravasti, Saket and Kaushambi). Additionally, Ujjain (Avanti) and Taxila.
- Excavations at some sites have exposed **relatively well-developed town-plans:**
    - People of this period were living in **rectangular houses** made of **burnt bricks.**
    - **Soak pits, terracotta pipes** and **ring wells** indicate people's concern with hygiene.
    - Aggressive style of **warfare** led to the construction of **moats** and **fortifications.**
- The overall remains indicate **a great increase in population** in comparison to the PGW settlements.

City Population Estimations

- Pataliputra: 2,70,000
- Mathura: 60,000
- Vidisha, Vaishali: 48,000
- Kaushambi, Rajgir, Ujjain: 40,000



Takshashila Bhir Mound excavation, Located between the rivers **Indus and Jhelum.**



The fortification wall at **Kaushambi**.



Shishupalgarh (today a suburb of Bhubaneswar, first excavated in 1948)

Knowledge Systems

Script:

There was the development of **Brahmi** and **Kharoshthi** scripts in this era.

- The earliest evidence in the north India remains to be Ashokan inscriptions.
- The earliest example of Brahmi script actually comes from the mid-5th-century BCE from Kodumanal, Porunthal (TN) and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka).

Vedangas (Sutra Literature):

The Vedangas are six auxiliary disciplines developed to support the proper understanding and practice of the Vedas. This literature emerged around 600 BCE. For systematization, Vedangas were prepared in **Sutra format**.

Shiksha	Pronunciation/phonetics
Chanda	Prosody, Poetic Metre
Vyakarana	Grammar **Panini** (around 500 BCE) wrote **Ashtadhyayi.**
Nirukta	Etymology, roots of the words, esp. archaic words. **Yaska's Nirukta** (called as **Nighantu**)
Kalpas	• **Shrauta Sutra:** sacrificial rituals performed by priests. • **Grihya Sutras:** Domestic Rituals and 16 samskars. (e.g. Ashvalayan) • **Shulba Sutra:** Fire-altar geometries for rituals. (e.g. Baudhayana) • **Dharma Sutra:** Conduct of life (injunctions and prohibitions) ○ (e.g. Apastamba, Gautama, Baudhayana, and Vashistha)
Jyotisha	Right time for rituals with the help of asterisms and astronomy. It's all about movement of planets for time keeping.

Takshashila University:

- It was established sometime after 1000 BCE (later Vedic period) at the junction of the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia, on the eastern shore of the Indus river.
- **Famous teachers/alumni:** Panini, Chanakya, Vasubandhu, Prasenjit, Jivaka, Chandragupta Maurya, Charaka, Vishnu Sharma



Jivaka treating Buddha's foot

Development of Medicine:

- **Sushrut** is known as the Father of Surgery. He possibly belonged to Kashi Mahajanapada.
- **Jivaka** was another important physician of the era.

Social Changes

(1) Class system:

Emergence of class-based society due to private property, state formation and urbanization.

- There was **increasing inequality in society.**
    - Dalidda, sadhana-adhana, sugata-dugata.
    - New social classes emerged viz. **Sresthin/Setthi** and **Grihapati/Gahpati**
- Still, earlier kinship ties continued to be important. (**nati-kulani**)

(2) Varna Norms:

This period saw the power of Brahmanical norms consolidate. Brahmins prepared Vedangas (appendix to Vedas) in this era.

- **Varna System: Four-fold Varna** division was now based on the birth. The varna system became more elaborate and the social boundaries were becoming more **rigid**. However, some social and occupational **mobility** was indeed there. **Buddhists-Jains** too mention varna system but its powerful association with religious sanction, which is most prevalent in Brahmanic literature, is lacking in them.
- For the first time, we notice **untouchability**, mentioned in Buddhist literature.
    - **Chandalas** were the worst affected persons.
    - Other untouchables mentioned are Nishada, Vena, Rathakara, and Pukkus.
- **Slavery** was practiced. Vinayapitaka mentions various types of slaves.

(3) Gender Relations:

Due to the increased rigidity of varna system, **social status of women further declined**.

- **Rights of pater family** increased – he could disinherit or sell his son.
- There was **discrimination** between boys and girls in inheritance.
- **Dowry system** was possibly a normal social practice.

Diversity of man-woman relationships were acknowledged in various religious traditions:

Vinaya Pitaka mentions 10 kinds of man-woman unions	Dharmasutras Ashta-vivaha
1. When a woman is bought by money (dhanakkhita) 2. when she stays of her own accord with a man (chhandavasini); 3. when a man gives her money (bhogavasin); 4. when a man gives her clothes (patavasini); 5. when an ablution of water is performed (odapattakani); 6. when she removes her headgear (obhatachumbata); 7. when she is also a female slave (dasinama); 8. when she is also a servant (kammakari); 9. when she is temporarily with a man (muhuttika); 10. when she is captured in a raid (dhajahata).	1. Brahma 2. Daiva 3. Arsha 4. Prajapatya 5. Gandharva 6. Asura 7. Rakshasa 8. Paishacha