

# HIS†ORY

## Kingdoms, Kings and an Early Republic

### The Powerful Kings

The power of the kings increased during the late Vedic period. Though the 'raja' was chosen, his power increased and he came to be highly respected. Many kings who performed the ritual of *ashvamedha* or horse sacrifice became very powerful. In this ritual, a horse was let loose to pass through various kingdoms. Any king who stopped the horse in his territory had to wage a war with the raja performing the *ashvamedha*. If none of the kings stopped the horse, it meant that the king performing the ritual had supreme authority. He then organised a sacrifice which was performed by specially appointed priests. All the other rajas were invited to this sacrifice and brought gifts with them. Gifts were also brought by the ordinary people. 'Shudras', the people belonging to the lower castes could not participate in the sacrifices.



Ashvamedha Yajna

### The Caste System

In the late Vedic Period, the caste system became rigid. There were many social groups in society such as farmers, herders, traders, warriors, craftsmen etc. The priests divided society into four castes or the 'varnas'.

- The first class was occupied by the Brahmins. They performed the rituals and imparted education to the people.
- The second varna, the Kshatriyas, was that of the rulers who participated in the war and had the responsibility of protecting the people.
- The third place was occupied by the *Vishor* the *Vaishyas*. They were farmers, traders and herders.
- The last place was occupied by the Shudras. They did all the menial work and were treated as slaves.
- The Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas could perform rituals and sacrifices.
- Often women were grouped with the Shudras and were also not allowed to study the Vedas.
- The caste system was based on occupation and was hereditary in nature. A son of a Brahmin automatically became a Brahmin. Similarly a son of a Shudra was considered to be a Shudra.
- The caste differences were sharp and acute in the Northern Indian Plains while in the north eastern part of the country, the social and economic differences were very few.



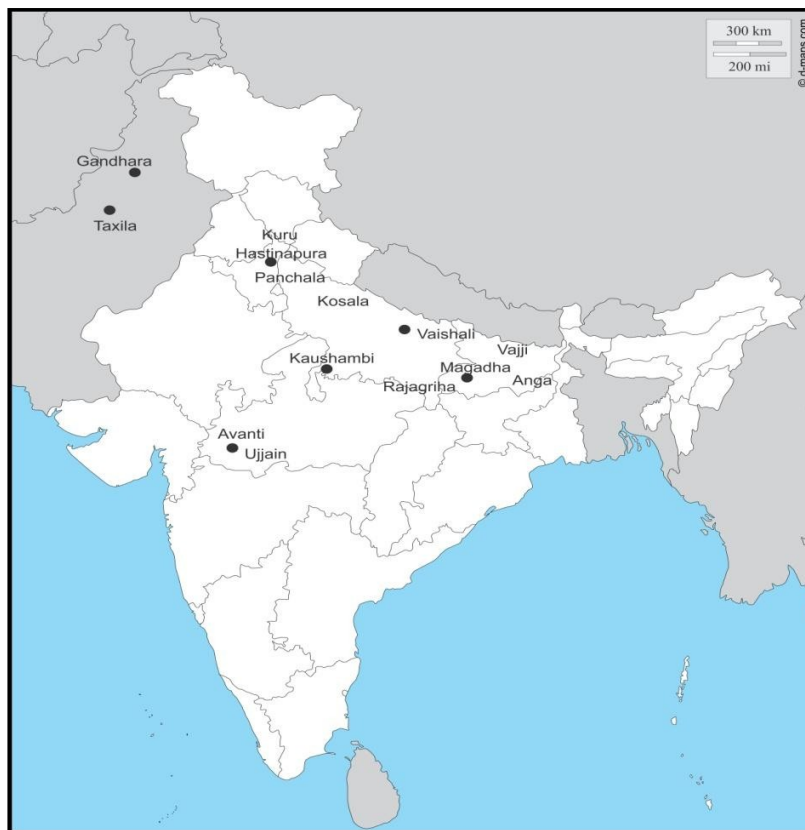
While the Brahmins occupied the highest position in the caste system, the Shudras occupied the lowest position

## Janapads and Mahajanpads

### Janapads

**Janapads** were formed when many janas or tribes came together and settled in a land. The rajas that performed the horse sacrifices became the rajas of the janapads.

Many janpad settlements have been found in the excavations at Purana Qila in Delhi, Hastinapur near Meerut and Atranjikhhera near Etah in Uttar Pradesh. People lived in huts and grew crops such as rice, wheat, barley and pulses.



Map showing some powerful janapads and mahajanpads.

### Mahajanpads

During the latter years, some janapads became more powerful than the other janapads. These came to be known as **mahajanpad**. Some of the famous mahajanpad during this time were Avanti, Magadha, Kosala and Anga etc. Some important features of the mahajanpads were:

- Most of the mahajanpads had capital cities which were fortified, which meant that they came to be surrounded by walls made up of bricks, wood and stone.
- This was done to save the cities from foreign attacks. Kings who wanted to display their power and wealth also fortified their cities.
- The rajas of the mahajanpads were powerful and thus began to maintain a huge army for protecting the land from the attacks of the neighbouring kings.
- The growing use of iron added to the resources of the kings. With the use of iron, strong weapons and tools could be made.

- Iron also brought far reaching changes in agriculture. The ploughshares made up of iron proved to be more effective than the wooden ploughshares. This led to an increase in the production.
- Paddy began to be transplanted. Now instead of scattering seeds on the ground, saplings were planted in the fields. This also increased the production as now many plants were able to survive.

## Taxes

As the kings of the mahajanpads needed money to build forts and to pay regular salaries to the soldiers, they started collecting regular taxes from the people. Some of the features of the taxation system were:

- Taxes were collected on crops. This tax was known as bhaga or a share. It was fixed at 1/6th of the produce.
- Taxes were also levied on various craftsmen.
- Herders paid taxes to the kings in form of animals or animal produce.
- Taxes were imposed on goods which were brought and sold through trade.
- The hunters and gatherers had to provide forest produce such as honey, lac etc. to the kings.
- Paddy began to be transplanted. Now instead of scattering seeds on the ground, saplings were planted in the fields. This also increased the production as now many plants were able to survive.

## Magadha

Magadha emerged as a powerful mahajanpad during this time. It had a monarchical form of government where the king was powerful and his position was hereditary. Some of the reasons which led to the growing power of Magadha were:

- The rivers Ganga and Son flowed through Magadha. This not only made the land fertile but also helped in transportation of goods from one place to the other.
- Magadha was heavily forested. Elephants found in the forests were trained to be used by the army. Wood was used for the building of chariots which helped strengthen the army.
- Wood obtained from forests was used for making houses and carts.
- Iron mines further helped the state in making strong tools and weapons.

Magadha was ruled by powerful rulers like Bimbisara and Ajatasattu who expanded the kingdom by conquering other janapads. Mahapadma Nanda later further extended the kingdom. Rajagriha remained as the capital of Magadha for many years. Later, Patliputra (modern Patna) became its new capital.

## Vajji

Vajji was an important kingdom during the Vedic period. Unlike Magadha, it was a republic state with its capital at Vaishali (Present Bihar). The republic form of government in Vajji was popularly called as *gana* or *sangha*. In a gana or a sangha, there are not one but many rulers. Each of the rulers was known as a raja. The rajas participated in assemblies where they discussed various matters including the defenses of the state. They followed the established rules and acted together. Women and dasas were not allowed to attend the meetings of the rajas. Lord Buddha and Mahavira belonged to the ganas or sanghas.

## King Alexander

King Alexander was a Macedonian ruler who came to India in about 326 B.C. He had the dream of conquering the world. When he reached the bank of the River Beas, his army refused to march further as they did not want to fight with the powerful Indian army. Finally, Alexander was forced to retreat.