

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: Rise & Growth of Magadha Empire [Ancient Indian History Notes for UPSC]

Rise of Magadha Notes for UPSC Exam

The four Mahajanapadas – Magadha, Kosala, Avanti and Vatsa were vying for supremacy from the 6th century BC to the 4th century BC. Finally, Magadha emerged victorious and was able to gain sovereignty. It became the most powerful state in ancient India. Magadha is situated in modern Bihar. Jarasandha, who was a descendant of Brihadratha founded the empire in Magadha. Both are talked about in the Mahabharata.

Haryanka Dynasty

The first important and powerful dynasty in Magadha.

Bimbisara (558 BC - 491 BC)

- Son of Bhattiya.
- He ruled over Magadha from 544 BC to 493 BC.
- Contemporary and follower of the Buddha. Was also said to be an admirer of Mahavira.
- Had his capital at Girivraja (Rajgir).
- Also known as Sreniya.
- He was the first king to have a standing army.
- 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 Modra, 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 BC.
- Won wars against Kosala and Vaishali.

Udayin

- Son of Ajatasatru.
- Shifted the capital to Pataliputra (Patna).
- Last of the major Haryanka rulers.
- 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

- He was the viceroy of Kasi before becoming king of Magadha.
- 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.”
- 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 Kashtriyantaka” (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.

Causes for the rise of Magadha

Geographical factors

- Magadha was located on the upper and lower parts of the Gangetic valley.
- It was located on the main land route between west and east India.
- The area had fertile soil. It also received enough rainfall.

- Magadha was encircled by rivers on three sides, the Ganga, Son and Champa making the region impregnable to enemies.
- Both Rajgir and Pataliputra were located in strategic positions.

Economic factors

- Magadha had huge copper and iron deposits.
- Because of its location, it could easily control trade.
- Had a large population which could be used for agriculture, mining, building cities and in the army.
- General prosperity of the people and the rulers.
- The mastery over Ganga meant economic hegemony. Ganga was important for trade in North India.
- With the annexation of Anga by Bimbisara, river Champa was added to the Magadha Empire. Champa was important in the trade with South-East Asia, Sri Lanka and South India.

Cultural factors

- Magadhan society had an unorthodox character.
- It had a good mix of Aryan and non-Aryan peoples.
- Emergence of Jainism and Buddhism led to a revolution in terms of philosophy and thought. They enhanced liberal traditions.
- Society was not so much dominated by the Brahmanas and many kings of Magadha were 'low' in origins.

Political factors

- Magadha was lucky to have many powerful and ambitious rulers.
- They had strong standing armies.
- Availability of iron enabled them to develop advanced weaponry.
- They were also the first kings to use elephants in the army.
- The major kings also developed a good administrative system.