

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

The Magadha Empire encompasses the rule of three dynasties over time - Haryanka Dynasty, Shishunaga Dynasty, and Nanda Dynasty. The timeline of the Magadha Empire is estimated to be from 684 BCE to 320 BCE. Read about the topic, 'Rise and Growth of the Magadha Empire,' in this article; which is important for the [IAS Exam](#) (Prelims - Ancient History and Mains - GS I & Optional).

### Rise of Magadha Notes for UPSC Exam

The four Mahajanapadas - Magadha, Kosala, Avanti and Vatsa were vying for supremacy from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. 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.

Read about the [16 Mahajanapadas](#) in the linked article.

### Magadha Empire - 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 Licchavi 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. Read more on Buddhist Councils [here](#).
- 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 Rajgriha. 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.

### **Magadha Empire - 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 the king. Sisunaga dynasty lasted from 413 BCE to 345 BCE.

#### **Sisunaga**

- Was the viceroy of Kasi before becoming king of Magadha.
- The capital was at Girivaraja.
- The most important achievement of Shishunaga was the destruction of the power of Avanti with its capital at Ujjain. This brought to an end the 100-year-old rivalry between Magadha and Avanti. Avanti became a part of the Magadha empire and continued to be so till the end of the Mauryan rule.
- Later shifted the capital to Vaishali.

#### **Kalasoka**

- Son of Sisunaga. Also known as Kakavarna.
- 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.

### **Magadha Empire - Nanda Dynasty**

This was the first non-Kshatriya dynasty and it lasted from 345 BCE to 321 BCE. 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.
- Thus, the Nandas were considered adharmika (those who don't follow the norms of Dharma). Buddhist texts describe the Nandas as belonging to annatakula (unknown lineage).
- His reign lasted for twenty-eight years.
- He is also called “Sarva Kshatriyantaka” (destroyer of all the Kshatriyas) and “Ekkrat” (sole sovereign who destroyed all other ruling princes).
- 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.
- He added Kalinga to Magadha and brought an image of Jina as a victory trophy.
- He also acquired Kosala which had probably rebelled against him.
- Also called Ugrasena in Pali texts because of his large army. The Nandas were fabulously rich and enormously powerful.
- They maintained 200,000 infantry, 60,000 cavalry and 6000 war elephants. Such a huge army could be maintained only through an effective taxation system.

## 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.
- Dhana Nanda 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 is credited with the invention of Nandopakramani (a particular measure).
- 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, who took advantage of the public resentment and established 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 mainland 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.
- The 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.
- The 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.
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