

Mahajanapadas - Social and Material Life

The '16 Mahajanapadas' are an important topic for the UPSC history segment. They form part of the ancient history section of the [UPSC syllabus](#). Questions are often asked from this section either in the UPSC prelims or mains exams. In this article, you can read all about the social and material life of the people of ancient India during the time of the Mahajanapadas.

To get the [List of 16 Mahajanapadas](#), check the linked article.

Social and Material Life in the Age of Mahajanapadas

(In the Age of The Buddha)

We can get an idea about the material life in north India during the age of the Buddha (especially eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) from the Pali texts and the Sanskrit Sutra literature in combination with the archaeological evidence. Archaeologically, the 6th century BCE marks the beginning of the NBPW (Northern Black Polished Ware) phase - a very glossy and shining pottery. The NBPW was made of very fine fabric and served as a tableware of the richer class.

- **The NBPW phase marked the beginning of the second urbanisation in India.** With the appearance of the towns in the middle Gangetic basin in the 6th century BCE, a second urbanisation began in India. Houses were mostly made up of mud brick and wood. Structures excavated are not really impressive but together with other material remains they indicate a huge population when compared with the Painted Grey Ware settlements.
- Many towns were seats of government and also served as major hubs of trade and commerce. The artisans and merchants inhabiting the towns were organised into guilds under their respective headmen. Both artisans and merchants lived in fixed localities in towns known as vessas (merchants' street). The "sethi" was a high level businessman associated with trade and money lending. Crafts, generally, were hereditary and the son learned his family trade from his father.
- The craft products were carried over large distances by merchants. All the major cities were located on the banks of rivers and trade routes, and were connected to one another.
 - The main trans-regional routes of that period were known as Uttarapatha (of northern India, stretching from the north west across the Indo-Gangetic plains to the port city of Tamralipti on the Bay of Bengal) and Dakshinapatha (of southern India, stretching from Pataliputra in Magadha to Pratishthana on the Godavari and connected to ports on the western coast).

- The internal trade routes joined the external ones and there is evidence of trade in the sub-continent along both eastern (Bengal with Myanmar) and western (Taxila with Afghanistan, Iran and Mesopotamia) region.
- The finished crafts, textile goods, sandalwood and pearls were major items of export while precious stones like gold, lapis lazuli, jade, silver, etc. were products of import.
- **Trade was facilitated by the use of money termed Nishka and Satamana.** The earliest coins are punch marked coins made largely of silver though a few copper ones have also been found. Pieces of metals were punched with certain marks such as trees, fish, bull, crescent, etc. The Pali texts indicate abundant use of money and its use to pay wages and prices.
- Both towns and villages were interdependent, the people in the towns were supplied with food material from villages and in turn, artisans and traders living in towns made cloth, tools, etc for the rural folk. The Pali texts (especially Vinaya Pitaka) mentions three types of villages:
 - **Typical villages** - inhabited by various castes and communities, headed by a village head man called “gramabhojaka”, gramini or gramakas. The majority of the villages belonged to this category. The bhojaka maintained law and order in the locality and also collected taxes from villagers.
 - **Sub - Urban villages** - these were in the form of craft villages e.g., carpenters' village, chariot makers' village, reed makers' village, etc. These suburban villages became markets for other villages and connected the rural and urban areas.
 - **Border villages** - these border villages were situated on the limits of the countryside which merged into forests. People living in border villages were mainly fowlers, hunters and led a backward life.
- The lands in the village were divided into cultivable plots and allotted family wise. Every family cultivated its plots with the help of its members supplemented by that of agricultural labourers. The peasants were required to pay 1/6th of their produce as tax, which was collected directly by royal agents and usually there were no intermediate landlords. Some villages were granted to big merchants and Brahmanas for their own usage. Rich peasants were called grihapatis, and were almost the same as Vaishyas.
- It was for the first time an advanced food producing economy was spreading over the rich alluvial soil of the middle Gangetic basin. This economy provided subsistence to direct producers and also to others who were not farmers.
- Rice was the staple cereal and paddy transplantation was widely practised. Along with rice, barley, millets, pulses, cotton & sugarcane were also produced. Agriculture made great advances because of the use of iron ploughshare and substantial fertility of the alluvial soil in the region. It seems that people were well acquainted with the richest iron mines in the country which was bound to increase the supply of tools for agriculture as well as craft.

Also read: [Rise and growth of the Magadha Empire.](#)

Mahajanapadas - Administrative System

This section talks about the administrative system during the time of the Mahajanapadas.

- The king was accorded the highest official status.
 - The king was chiefly a warlord who led his kingdom from one victory to another.
 - The king governed with the help of officials. Higher officials were known as 'Amatyas' or 'Mahamatras' and they performed several functions like those of Commander (Senanayaka), Minister (Mantrin), chief accountant, judge and head of the royal harem.
 - Ayuktas were another class of officers who also conducted similar functions in a few states.
 - The Buddhist text mentions an influential minister named Varsakara who helped Ajatashatru conquer Vaishali by creating dissension among the Lichchhavis of Vaishali.
 - The village headmen (Gramini, Gramabhojaka or Gramika) were responsible for the villages' administration.
- The real enhancement in state power is evident by the establishment of huge professional armies.
 - In order to sustain a huge army, a robust fiscal system was required.
 - The peasants had also to pay a compulsory payment called 'Bali', which was collected by special officers called 'Balisadhakas'. During Vedic times, this payment was voluntary and paid by tribesmen to their chiefs.
 - One-sixth of the produce was collected as tax by the king from the peasants.
 - The
 - The development of writing may have aided in tax assessment and collection. Tax was paid in both cash as well as kind.
 - Popular assemblies i.e, the Sabha and the Samithi had practically disappeared and instead, a small body called Parishad, consisting exclusively of the Brahmanas, served as the advisory council to the king.

Mahajanapadas - Legal and Social System

The Indian legal and judicial system originated in this period.

- The tribal community had been clearly divided into four classes - Brahmanas (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (peasants and taxpayers) and Shudras (who served all other classes).
- The Dharmasutra laid down the duties for each of the varna and the civil and the criminal law came to be based on the varna division.
- The higher the varna, the purer it was and higher was the order of moral conduct expected.
- All kinds of disabilities were imposed on the Shudras.
 - They were deprived of all the rights and relegated to the lowest position in the society.

- The law makers emphasized the fiction that Shudras were born from the feet of the creator.
 - The Shudras were specifically asked to serve the dvijas (twice-born - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas) as slaves, artisans and agricultural labourers.
 - Civil and criminal laws were administered by royal agents who inflicted rough and ready punishments such as scourging, beheading, etc.
 - In many cases, punishments for criminal offences were governed by the idea of revenge - a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye.
 - Despite the emergence of the socio-economic disparities, kinship ties continued to be extremely important, and were eventually incorporated in the caste hierarchy.
 - Extended kin groups were referred to as Nati and Nati-kulani.
 - Kula denoted extended patrilineal family, while Natakas included relatives on both mothers' and fathers' sides.
 - The strengthening of the patriarchal control within the household led to the increased subordination of women. Different Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain texts point towards the low status of women. They prescribe an ideal code of conduct and define their expected roles. The son was preferred over a daughter, as sons were thought necessary for the continuation of lineage.
-