

16 Mahajanapadas

Angutara Nikaya, a Buddhist scripture mentions 16 great kingdoms or Mahajanapadas at the beginning of the 6th century BCE in India. They emerged during the Vedic Age. The history of the emergence of Mahajanapadas can be linked to the development of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar during the 6th to 4th century BCE where agriculture flourished due to the availability of fertile lands and iron production increased due to availability of iron ore in large quantities. This resulted in the expansion of the territories of the Janapadas (due to the use of iron weapons) and later addressed as 16 highly developed regions or the Mahajanapadas.

Emergence of Mahajanapadas from Janapadas

The Janapadas were the major kingdoms of Vedic India. During that period, Aryans were the most powerful tribes and were called 'Janas'. This gave rise to the term Janapada where Jana means 'people' and Pada means 'foot'.

By the 6th century BCE, there were approximately 22 different Janapadas. Socio-economic developments chiefly due to the use of iron tools in agriculture and military, along with religious and political developments led to the rise of the Mahajanapadas from small kingdoms or Janapadas. The people gained a strong allegiance to the territory or Janapada they belonged to rather than the tribe or the jana. This period is also known as the era of **second urbanisation**, first being the [Harappan civilisation](#).

During that period, the political centre shifted from the west of the Indo-Gangetic plains to the eastern side of it. This was due to better fertility of the land because of more rainfall and rivers. Also, this region was closer to iron production centres.

Which were the 16 Mahajanapadas?

List of 16 Mahajanapadas that arose before the rise of Buddhism in India:



The list below provides you with the names of 16 Mahajanapadas:

1. Kasi
2. Kosala
3. Anga
4. Magadha
5. Vajji
6. Malla
7. Chedi/Cheti
8. Vatsa
9. Kuru
10. Panchala
11. Matsya
12. Surasena/Shurasena
13. Assaka
14. Avanti
15. Gandhara
16. Kamboja

In the course of time, smaller or weak kingdoms, and the republics were eliminated by the stronger rulers. Vajji and Malla were Gana-Sanghas. The Gana-Sanghas had a government by assembly and within the assembly they had oligarchy. In the 6th century only 4 powerful kingdoms remained:

1. Magadha (Important rulers: Bimbisara, Ajatashatru)
2. Avanti (Important ruler: Pradyota)
3. Kosala (Important ruler: Prasenjit)
4. Vatsa (Important ruler: Udayana)

Later, all of them were annexed to or became part of Magadha. Know more about the [rise and growth of the Magadha Empire](#) in the linked article.

16 Mahajanapadas – Facts for UPSC Exam

The table gives you the details of the 16 Mahajanapadas:

16 Mahajanapadas	Capital of the Mahajanapadas	Modern Location	Facts about 16 Mahajanapadas
Anga	Champa	Munger and Bhagalpur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anga Mahajanapada finds reference in the Mahabharata and Atharva Veda. • During the rule of Bimbisara, it was taken over by Magadha Empire. • It is situated in present-day Bihar and West Bengal. • Its capital Champa was located at the confluence of the Ganga and the Champa rivers. • It was an important commercial centre on the trade routes and merchants sailed from here to Suvarnabhumi (South East Asia).
Magadha	Girivraja/ Rajagriha	Gaya and Patna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magadha finds mention in the Atharva Veda. • It was located in present-day Bihar close to Anga, divided by river Champa. • Later, Magadha became a centre of Jainism and the first Buddhist Council was held in Rajagriha.
Kasi/Kashi	Kasi	Banaras	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was located in Varanasi. • This city got its name from rivers Varuna and Asi as cited in the Matsya Purana. • Kasi was captured by Kosala.
Vatsa	Kausambi	Allahabad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vatsa is also known as Vamsa. • Located on the banks of the Yamuna. • This Mahajanapada followed the monarchical form of governance.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The capital was Kausambi/Kaushambi (which was at the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna). • This was a central city for economic activities. • Trade and business prospered in the 6th century. After the rise of Buddha, the ruler Udayana made Buddhism a state religion.
Kosala	Shravasti (northern), Kushavati (southern)	Eastern Uttar Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was located in modern Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh. • The area also included Ayodhya, an important city associated with the Ramayana. • Kosala also included the tribal republican territory of Sakyas of Kapilavastu. Lumbini in Kapilavastu is the birthplace of Gautama Buddha. • Important king - Prasenajit (Buddha's contemporary)
Shurasena	Mathura	Western Uttar Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This place was a centre of Krishna worship at the time of Megasthenes. • There was a dominance of the Buddha's followers also. • Important king - Awantipura (Disciple of Buddha). • Its capital Mathura was on the banks of the Yamuna.
Panchala	Ahichchatra and Kampilya	Western Uttar Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its capital for northern Panchala was Ahichchatra (modern Bareilly) and Kampilya (modern Farrukhabad) for its southern regions. • The famous city of Kannauj was situated in the Kingdom of Panchala. • Later the nature of governance shifted from monarchy to republic.
Kuru	Indraprastha	Meerut and Southeastern Haryana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The area around Kurukshetra was apparently the site for Kuru Mahajanapada. • It moved to a republic form of governance. • The epic poem, the Mahabharata, tells of a conflict between two branches of the reigning Kuru clan.
Matsya	Viratanagara	Jaipur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was situated to the west of the Panchalas and south of the Kurus. • The capital was at Viratanagara (modern Bairat). • It is situated around present-day Jaipur, Alwar

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and Bharatpur area of Rajasthan. • Founder - Virata
Chedi	Sothivati	Bundelkhand region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This was cited in the Rigveda. • The capital was Sothivati/Shuktimati/Sotthivatinagara • It located in the present-day Bundelkhand region (Central India). • King - Shishupala. He was killed by Vasudeva Krishna during the Rajasuya sacrifice of the Pandava king Yudhishtira.
Avanti	Ujjaini or Mahismati	Malwa and Madhya Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avanti was significant in relation to the rise of Buddhism. • The capital of Avanti was located at Ujjaini (northern part) and Mahismati (southern part). • It was situated around present-day Malwa and Madhya Pradesh. • Important king - Pradyota. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Father-in-law of Udayana (King of the Vatsas).
Gandhara	Taxila	Rawalpindi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The capital was at Taxila (Takshashila). • Present-day location - Modern Peshawar and Rawalpindi, Pakistan and the Kashmir valley. • Gandhara is cited in the Atharva Veda. • The people were highly trained in the art of war. • It was significant for international commercial activities. • Important king - Pushkarasarin. • Gandhara was conquered by Persians in the latter part of the sixth century BCE.
Kamboja	Poonch	Rajouri and Hajra (Kashmir), NWFP (Pakistan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The capital of Kamboja was Poonch. • It is situated in present-day Kashmir and Hindukush. • Several literary sources mention that Kamboja was a republic. • Kambojas had an excellent breed of horses.
Asmaka or Assaka	Potali/Podana	Banks of Godavari	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was located on the banks of Godavari. • It was the only Mahajanapada situated to the south of the Vindhya Range and was in Dakshinapatha. • It included the region of Pratisthan or Paithan.

Vajji	Vaishali	Bihar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North of Ganga in the division of Tirhut was the state of the Vajjis. • It included eight clans, the most powerful being the Lichchhavis (Capital - Vaishali), Videhans (Capital - Mithila), Jnatrikas (based in Kundapura). • Mahavira belonged to the Jnatrikas clan. • The Vajjis were defeated by Ajatashatru.
Malla	Kusinara	Deoria and Uttar Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It finds a reference in Buddhist and Jain texts and in the Mahabharata. • Malla was a republic. • Its territory touched the northern border of the Vajji state. • Capitals - Kusinara and Pava. • Both capitals are important in the history of Buddhism. The Buddha took his last meal at Pava and went to Mahaparinirvana at Kusinara.

Political Structure of the Mahajanapadas

- Most of the states were monarchies but some were republics known as Ganas or Sanghas. These Ganasanghas were oligarchies where the king was elected and he ruled with the help of a council. Vajji was an important Mahajanapada with a Sangha form of government.
- The founders of Jainism and Buddhism came from republican states.
- Each Mahajanapada had a capital city.
- Most of them had forts built around them for protection from other kings.
- Regular armies were maintained by these new kings or Rajas.
- They also collected taxes from the people. Usually, the tax on crops was 1/6th of the produce. This was known as Bhaga or share.
- Even craftsmen, herders, hunters and traders were taxed.

Changes in agriculture

There were two major changes in agriculture:

- The growing use of iron ploughshares. This increased production.
- The farmers began transplanting paddy. This means that instead of scattering seeds on the soil, saplings were grown and planted in the fields. This greatly increased the production but work also increased manifold.

Significance of the 6th century

It is from the 6th century BC that a continuous political history of India can be stated.

Difference between Gana-Sanghas and Kingdoms

Gana - Sanghas	Kingdoms
1. The chief office was not hereditary and was known as Ganapati or Ganaraja.	1. All the powers were vested with the King and his family.
2. The Ganas were located in or near the Himalayan foothills in eastern India.	2. Majority of the kingdoms occupied the fertile alluvial tracts of the Ganga valley.
3. Representative form of government. The council discussed and debated the issues in a hall, called Santhagara. Salakas (pieces of wood) were used for voting and Salaka-Gahapaka (collector of votes) ensured honesty and impartiality.	3. Political power was concentrated in the king who was assisted by ministers, advisory councils such as Parishad and Sabha. However, with the emergence of the concept of the divinity of king and more emphasis on priestly rituals, the centrality of the popular assemblies was reduced.
4. The Gana-Sanghas had only two strata- the Kshatriya Rajakula (ruling families) and the Dasa Karmakara (slaves and labourers).	4. The focus was mainly on caste loyalties and loyalty towards the king.
5. Gana Sanghas were more tolerant than the kingdoms. It is because of this tolerance - Mahavira (Jainism, belonged to Vajji confederacy) and Buddha (Buddhism , belonged to Shakya clan) were able to propagate their philosophy in a more unrestricted way in Gana-Sanghas as compared to Kingdoms.	5. The Brahmanical political, social and religious theory was more deeply entrenched in the kingdoms.