

Mahajanapada

A **Mahājanapada** (Sanskrit: महाजनपद, lit. 'great realm', from *maha*, "great", and *janapada* "foothold of a tribe, country") was one of the sixteen kingdoms or oligarchic republics that existed in ancient India from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE. Two of them were most probably ganatantras (republics) and others had forms of monarchy. Ancient Buddhist texts like the *Anguttara Nikaya*^[1] make frequent reference to sixteen great kingdoms and republics which had evolved and flourished in a belt stretching from Gandhara in the northwest to Anga in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent and included parts of the trans-Vindhyan region,^[2] prior to the rise of Buddhism in India.^[3]

The 6th–5th century BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history; it saw the emergence of India's first large cities after the demise of the Indus Valley Civilization, as well as the rise of sramana movements (including Buddhism and Jainism) which challenged the religious orthodoxy of the Vedic Period.

Archaeologically, this period corresponds in part to the Northern Black Polished Ware culture.^[4]

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 c. 600 BCE– c. 345 BCE
 Mahājanapada Period (c. 500 BCE) Map showing the location of 16 great states (kingdoms and republics) in the Indian subcontinent during the Mahājanapada Period.

Overview

The term "Janapada" literally means the *foothold of a tribe*. The fact that *Janapada* is derived from *Jana* points to an early stage of land-taking by the Jana tribe for a settled way of life. This process of first settlement on land had completed its final stage prior to the times of the Buddha and Pāṇini. The Pre-Buddhist north-west region of the Indian sub-continent was divided into several Janapadas demarcated from each other by boundaries. In Pāṇini's "Ashtadhyayi", *Janapada* stands for country and *Janapadin* for its citizenry. Each of these Janapadas was named after the Kshatriya tribe (or the Kshatriya Jana) who had settled therein.^{[5][6][7][8][9][10][11][12]} Buddhist and other texts only incidentally refer to sixteen great nations (*Solasa Mahajanapadas*) which were in existence before the time of the Buddha. They do not give any connected history except in the case of Magadha. The Buddhist Anguttara Nikaya, at several places,^[13] gives a list of sixteen great nations:



Pottery of the Northern Black Polished Ware culture (c. 500-200 BCE), associated with the Mahajanapada period

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. <u>Anga</u> | 9. <u>Kuru</u> |
| 2. <u>Assaka</u> (or Asmaka) | 10. <u>Magadha</u> |
| 3. <u>Avanti</u> | 11. <u>Malla</u> |
| 4. <u>Chedi</u> | 12. <u>Machcha</u> (or Matsya) |
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| 7. <u>Kamboja</u> | 15. <u>Vriji</u> |
| 8. <u>Kosala</u> | 16. <u>Vatsa</u> (or Vamsa) |

Another Buddhist text, the Digha Nikaya, mentions only the first twelve Mahajanapadas and omits the last four in the above list.^[14]

Chulla-Niddesa, another ancient text of the Buddhist canon, adds Kalinga to the list and substitutes Yona for Gandhara, thus listing the Kamboja and the Yona as the only Mahajanapadas from Uttarapatha.^{[15][16]}

The Vyākhyāprajñapti, a sutra of Jainism, gives a slightly different list of sixteen Mahajanapadas:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Anga | 9. Padha |
| 2. Banga (Vanga) | 10. Ladha (Lata) |
| 3. Magadha | 11. Bajji (Vajji) |
| 4. Malaya | 12. Moli (Malla) |
| 5. Malavaka | 13. Kasi |
| 6. Accha | 14. <u>Kosala</u> |
| 7. Vaccha | 15. Avaha |
| 8. Kochcha | 16. Sambhuttara |

The author of the Bhagvati has a focus on the countries of Madhydesa and of the far east and south only. He omits the nations from Uttarapatha like the Kamboja and Gandhara. The more extended horizon of the *Bhagvati* and the omission of all countries from Uttarapatha "clearly shows that the Bhagvati list is of later origin and therefore less reliable."^[17]

List of mahajanapadas

Anga

The first reference to the Angas is found in the Atharva-Veda where they find mention along with the Magadhas, Gandharis and the Mujavats, apparently as a despised people. The Jaina Prajnapana ranks Angas and Vangas in the first group of Aryan people. It mentions the principal cities of ancient India.^[18] It was also a great center of trade and commerce and its merchants regularly sailed to distant Suvarnabhumi. Anga was annexed by Magadha in the time of Bimbisara. This was the one and only conquest of Bimbisara.

Assaka

The country of Assaka or the Ashmaka tribe was located in *Dakshinapatha* or southern India. In Buddha's time, many of the Assakas were located on the banks of the river Godavari (south of the Vindhya mountains). The capital of the Assakas was Potana or Potali, which corresponds to Paudanya of Mahabharata. The Ashmakas are also mentioned by Pāṇini. They are placed in the north-west in the *Markendeya Purana* and the *Brhat Samhita*. The river Godavari separated the country of the Assakas from that of the Mulakas (or Alakas). The commentator of Kautiliya's Arthashastra identifies Ashmaka with Maharashtra. The country of Assaka lay outside the pale of Madhyadesa. It was located on a southern high road, the *Dakshinapatha*. At one time, Assaka included Mulaka and abutted Avanti.^[19]

Avanti

The country of the Avantis was an important kingdom of western India and was one of the four great monarchies in India in the post era of Mahavira and Buddha, the other three being Kosala, Vatsa and Magadha. Avanti was divided into north and south by the river Narmada. Initially, Mahishamati (Mahissati) was the capital of Southern Avanti, and Ujjaini (Sanskrit: Ujjayini) was of northern Avanti, but at the times of Mahavira and Buddha, Ujjaini was the capital of integrated Avanti. The country of Avanti roughly corresponded to modern Malwa, Nimar and adjoining parts of today's Madhya Pradesh. Both Mahishmati and Ujjaini stood on the southern high road called *Dakshinapatha* which extended from Rajagriha to Pratishthana (modern Paithan). Avanti was an important centre of Buddhism and some of the leading *theras* and *theris* were born and resided there. King Nandivardhana of Avanti was defeated by king Shishunaga of Magadha. Avanti later became part of the Magadhan empire.

Chedi

The Chedis, Chetis or Chetyas had two distinct settlements of which one was in the mountains of Nepal and the other Bundelkhand near Kausambi. According to old authorities, Chedis lay near Yamuna midway between the kingdom of Kurus and Vatsas. In the mediaeval period, the southern frontiers of Chedi extended to the banks of the river Narmada. Sotthivatnagara, the Sukti or Suktimati of Mahabharata, was the capital of Chedi. The Chedis were an ancient people of India and are mentioned in the Rigveda, with their king Kashu Chaidya.^[20]

The location of the capital city, Suktimati, has not been established with certainty. Historian Hem Chandra Raychaudhuri and F. E. Pargiter believed that it was in the vicinity of Banda, Uttar Pradesh.^[21] Archaeologist Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti has proposed that Suktimati can be identified as the ruins of a large early historical city, at a place with the modern-day name Itaha, on the outskirts of Rewa, Madhya Pradesh.^[22]

Gandhara

The wool of the Gandharis is referred to in the Rigveda. The Gandharas and their king figure prominently as strong allies of the Kurus against the Pandavas in the Mahabharata war. The Gandharas were furious people, well-trained in the art of war. According to Puranic traditions, this Janapada was founded by Gandhara, son of Arudhha, a descendant of Yayati. The princes of this country are said to have come from the line of Druhyu who was a famous king of the Rigvedic period. The river Indus watered the lands of Gandhara. Taksashila and Pushkalavati, the two cities of this Mahajanapada, are said to have been named after Taksa and Pushkara, the two sons of Bharata, a prince of Ayodhya. According to Vayu Purana (II.36.107), the Gandharas were destroyed by Pramiti (aka Kalika) at the end of Kaliyuga. Pāṇini mentioned both the Vedic form Gandhari as well as the later form Gandhara in his Ashtadhyayi. The Gandhara kingdom sometimes also included Kashmira.^[23] Hecataeus of Miletus (549-468) refers to Kaspapyros (Kasyapura or Purushapura, i.e., modern day Peshawar) as a Gandharic city. According to Gandhara Jataka, at one time, Gandhara formed a part of the kingdom of Kashmir. The Jataka also gives another name *Chandahara* for Gandhara. Gandhara Mahajanapada of Buddhist traditions included territories of east Afghanistan, and north-west of the Panjab (modern districts of Peshawar (Purushapura) and Rawalpindi). Its later capital was Taksashila (Prakrit for Taxila). The Taksashila University was a renowned centre of learning in ancient times, where scholars from all over the world came to seek higher education. Pāṇini, the Indian genius of grammar and Kautiliya are the world-renowned products of Taxila University. King Pukkusati or Pushkarasarin of Gandhara in the

middle of the 6th century BCE was the contemporary of king Bimbisara of Magadha. Gandhara was located on the grand northern high road (Uttarapatha) and was a centre of international commercial activities. According to one group of scholars, the Gandharas and Kambojas were cognate people.^{[24][25][26]} It is also contended that the Kurus, Kambojas, Gandharas and Bahlikas were cognate people.^[27] According to Dr T. L. Shah, the Gandhara and Kamboja were nothing but two provinces of one empire and were located coterminously, hence influencing each other's language.^[28] Naturally, they may have once been a cognate people.^[29] Gandhara was often linked politically with the neighboring regions of Kashmir and Kamboja.^[30]

Kamboja

Kambojas are also included in the Uttarapatha. In ancient literature, the Kamboja is variously associated with the Gandhara, Darada and the Bahlika (Bactria). Ancient Kamboja is known to have comprised regions on either side of the Hindukush. The original Kamboja was located in eastern Oxus country as neighbor to Bahlika, but with time, some clans of the Kambojas appear to have crossed the Hindukush and planted colonies on its southern side also. These latter Kambojas are associated with the Daradas and Gandharas in Indian literature and also find mention in the Edicts of Ashoka. The evidence in the Mahabharata and in Ptolemy's Geography distinctly supports two Kamboja settlements.^[31] The cis-Hindukush region from Nurestan up to Rajauri in southwest of Kashmir sharing borders with the Daradas and the Gandharas constituted the *Kamboja* country.^[32] The capital of *Kamboja* was probably *Rajapura* (modern Rajori) in the south-west of Kashmir. The *Kamboja Mahajanapada* of the Buddhist traditions refers to this cis-Hindukush branch of ancient Kambojas.^[33]

The trans-Hindukush region including the Pamirs and Badakhshan which shared borders with the Bahlikas (Bactria) in the west and the Lohas and Rishikas of Sogdiana/Fergana in the north, constituted the Parama-Kamboja country.^[34] The trans-Hindukush branch of the Kambojas remained pure Iranian but a large section of the Kambojas of cis-Hindukush appears to have come under Indian cultural influence. The Kambojas are known to have had both Iranian as well as Indian affinities.^{[35][36][37][38][39][40][41][42][43][44][45]}

The Kambojas were also a well known republican people since Epic times. The Mahabharata refers to several Ganah (or Republics) of the Kambojas.^[46] Kautiliya's Arthashastra^[47] and Ashoka's Edict No. XIII also attest that the Kambojas followed republican constitution. {Citation needed|date=February 2018} } Pāṇini's Sutras,^[48] though tend to convey that the Kamboja of Pāṇini was a Kshatriya monarchy, but "the special rule and the exceptional form of derivative" he gives to denote the ruler of the Kambojas implies that the king of Kamboja was a titular head (*king consul*) only.^[49] According to Buddhist texts, the first fourteen of the above Mahajanapadas belong to Majjhimadesa (*Mid India*) while the last two belong to Uttarapatha or the *north-west* division of Jambudvīpa.

In a struggle for supremacy that followed in the 6th/5th century BCE, the growing state of the Magadhas emerged as the predominant power in ancient India, annexing several of the Janapadas of the Majjhimadesa. A bitter line in the Brahmin Puranas laments that Magadhan emperor Mahapadma Nanda exterminated all Kshatriyas, none worthy of the name Kshatriya being left thereafter. This obviously refers to the Kasis, Kosalas, Kurus, Panchalas, Vatsyas and other neo-Vedic tribes of the east Panjab of whom nothing was ever heard except in the legend and poetry. (The Nandas usurped the throne of Shishunaga dynasty c. 345 BCE, thus founding the Nanda Empire).^[50]

The Kambojans and Gandharans, however, never came into direct contact with the Magadhan state until Chandragupta and Kautiliya arose on the scene. But these nations also fell prey to the Achaemenids of Persia during the reign of Cyrus (558–530 BCE) or in the first year of Darius. Kamboja and Gandhara formed the twentieth and richest satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire. Cyrus I is said to have destroyed the famous Kamboja city called Kapisi (modern Begram) in Paropamisade.

Kashi

The kingdom was located in the region around its capital Varanasi, bounded by the Varuna and Asi rivers in the north and south which gave Varanasi its name. Before Buddha, Kasi was the most powerful of the sixteen Mahajanapadas. Several *jataka tales* bear witness to the superiority of its capital over other cities in India and speak highly of its prosperity and opulence. These stories tell of the long struggle for supremacy between Kashi and the three kingdoms of Kosala, Anga and Magadha. Although King Brihadratha of

Kashi conquered Kosala, Kashi was later incorporated into Kosala by King Kansa during Buddha's time. The Kashis along with the Kosalas and Videhans find mention in Vedic texts and appear to have been a closely allied people. The Matsya Purana and Alberuni spell Kashi as *Kausika* and *Kaushaka* respectively. All other ancient texts read Kashi.

Kosala

The country of Kosala was located to the north-west of Magadha, with its capital at Ayodhya. Its territory corresponded to the modern Awadh (or Oudh) in Central and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. It had the river Ganges for its southern, the river Gandak (Narayani) for its eastern, and the Himalaya mountains for its northern boundary. It finds mention as the center of Vedic Dharma. Its kings allied with the Devatas in various wars against the Daityas, Rakshas, and Asuras. Koshala and Ayodhya hold a central place in the Hindu scriptures, Itihas, and Purana. Raghuvansha-Ikshvakuvanshaw was the longest continuous dynasty; Lord Rama was a king in this dynasty. Other great kings were Prithu, Harishchandra, and Dilip, who are each mentioned in different Puranas, Ramayan, and Mahabharat. According to these texts, Koshala was the most powerful and biggest kingdom ever in the recorded history. Later, the kingdom was ruled by the famous king Prasenajit during the era of Mahavira and Buddha, followed by his son Vidudabha (Virudhaka). King Prasenajit/Prasenjit Dhaka was highly educated. His position was further improved by a matrimonial alliance with Magadha: his sister was married to Bimbisara and part of Kasi was given as dowry. There was, however, a struggle for supremacy between king Pasenadi (Prasenajit) and king Ajatashatru of Magadha which was finally settled once the confederation of Lichchavis became aligned with Magadha. Kosala was ultimately merged into Magadha when Vidudabha was Kosala's ruler. Ayodhya, Saketa, Banaras, and Sravasti were the chief cities of Kosala.



This detailed map shows the locations of Kingdoms mentioned in the Indian epics or Bharata Khanda.

Kuru

The Puranas trace the origin of Kurus from the Puru-Bharata family. Kuru was born after 25 generations of Puru's dynasty, and after 15 generations of Kuru, Kauravas and Pandavas were born. Aitareya Brahmana locates the Kurus in *Madhyadesha* and also refers to the Uttarakurus as living beyond the Himalayas. According to the Buddhist text Sumangavilasini,^[51] the people of Kururashtra (the Kurus) came from the Uttarakuru. Vayu Purana attests that *Kuru*, son of Samvarsana of the Puru lineage, was the eponymous ancestor of the Kurus and the founder of Kururashtra (Kuru Janapada) in Kurukshetra. The country of the Kurus roughly corresponded to the modern Thanesar, state of Delhi, and Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. According to the Jatakas, the capital of the Kurus was Indraprastha (Indapatta) near modern Delhi which extended seven leagues. At Buddha's time, the Kuru country was ruled by a titular chieftain (king consul) named Koravya. The Kurus of the Buddhist period did not occupy the same position as they did in the Vedic period but they continued to enjoy their ancient reputation for deep wisdom and sound health. The Kurus had matrimonial relations with the Yadavas, the Bhojas, Trigratas and the Panchalas. There is a Jataka reference to king Dhananjaya, introduced as a prince from the race of Yudhishtira. Though a well known monarchical people in the earlier period, the Kurus are known to have switched to a republican form of government during the 6th to 5th centuries BCE. In the 4th century BCE, Kautiliya's Arthashastra also attests the Kurus following the Rajashabdopajivin (king consul) constitution.

Magadha

The Magadha was one of the most prominent and prosperous of mahajanapadas. The capital city Pataliputra (Patna, Bihar) was situated on the confluence of major rivers like the Ganga, Son, Punpun and Gandak. The alluvial plains of this region and its proximity to the copper and iron rich areas of Bihar and Jharkhand helped the kingdom to develop good quality weapons and support the agrarian economy. Its location at the centre of the highways of trade of those days contributed to its wealth. All these factors helped Magadha to emerge as the most prosperous state of that period. The kingdom of the Magadhas roughly corresponded to the modern districts of Patna and Gaya in southern Bihar and parts of Bengal in the east. The capital city of Pataliputra was bound in the north by the river Ganges, in the east by the river Champa, in the south by the Vindhya mountains and in the west by the river Sona.

During Buddha's time its boundaries included Anga. Its earliest capital was Girivraja or Rajagaha (modern Rajgir in the Nalanda district of Bihar). The other names for the city were Magadhapura, Brihadrathapura, Vasumati, Kushagrapura and Bimbisrapuri. It was an active center of Jainism in ancient times. The first Buddhist Council was held in Rajagaha in the Vaibhara Hills. Later on, Pataliputra became the capital of Magadha.

Malla

The Mallas are frequently mentioned in Buddhist and Jain works. They were a powerful people dwelling in Northern South Asia. According to Mahabharata, Panduputra Bhimasena is said to have conquered the chief of the Mallas/Malls in the course of his expedition in Eastern India. During the Buddhist period, the Mallas/Malls Kshatriya were a republican people with their dominion consisting of nine territories^[52] corresponding to the nine confederated clans. These republican states were known as Gana. Two of these confederations - one with Kuśināra (modern Kasia near Gorakhpur) as its capital and the second with Pava (modern Padrauna, 12 miles from Kasia) as the *capital* - had become very important at the time of Buddha. Kuśināra and Pava are very important in the history of Buddhism and Jainism since Buddha and Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara took their last meals at Kushinara and Pava/Pavapuri respectively. Buddha was taken ill at Pava and died at Kusinara, whereas lord Mahavira took his Nirvana at Pavapuri. It is widely believed that Lord Gautam died at the courtyard of King Sastipal Mall of Kushinagar/Kushinara. Kushinagar is now the centre of the Buddhist pilgrimage circle which is being developed by the tourism development corporation of Uttar Pradesh.

The Mallas, like the Licchavis, are mentioned by Manusmriti as Vratya Kshatriyas. They are called Vasishthas (Vasetthas) in the Mahapparnibbana Suttanta. The Mallas originally had a monarchical form of government but later they switched to one of Samgha (republic), the members of which called themselves *rajas*. The Mallas appeared to have formed an alliance with the Licchhavis for self-defense but lost their independence not long after Buddha's death and their dominions were annexed to the Magadhan empire.

Matsya

The country of the Matsya or Machcha tribe lay to the south of the Kurus and west of the Yamuna, which separated them from the Panchalas. It roughly corresponded to the former state of Jaipur in Rajasthan, and included the whole of Alwar with portions of Bharatpur. The capital of Matsya was at Viratanagara (modern Bairat) which is said to have been named after its founder king Vata. In Pali literature, the Matsyas are usually associated with the Surasenas. The western Matsya was the hill tract on the north bank of the Chambal. A branch of Matsya is also found in later days in the Vizagapatam region. The Matsyas had not much political importance of their own during the time of Buddha. King Sujata ruled over both the Chedis and Matsyas, thus showing that Matsya once formed a part of the Chedi kingdom.

Panchala

The Panchalas occupied the country to the east of the Kurus between the mountains and river Ganges. It roughly corresponded to modern Budaun, Farrukhabad and the adjoining districts of Uttar Pradesh. The country was divided into Uttara-Panchala and Dakshina-Panchala. The northern Panchala had its capital at Adhichhatra or Chhatravati (modern Ramnagar in the Bareilly District), while southern Panchala had its capital at Kampilya or Kampil in the Farrukhabad District. The famous city of Kanyakubja or Kanauj was situated in the kingdom of Panchala. Originally a monarchical clan, the Panchals appear to have switched to republican corporation in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. In the 4th century BCE, Kautiliya's Arthashastra also attests the Panchalas as following the *Rajashabdopajivin* (king consul) constitution.

Surasena

The country of the Surasenas lay to the east of Matsya and west of Yamuna. This corresponds roughly to the Brij region of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan, and Gwalior region of Madhya Pradesh. It had its capital at Madhura or Mathura. Avantiputra, the king of Surasena, was the first among the chief disciples of Buddha, through whose help Buddhism gained ground in Mathura country. The Andhakas and Vrishnis of Mathura/Surasena are referred to in the Ashtadhyayi of Pāṇini. In Kautiliya's Arthashastra,

the Vrishnis are described as *sangha* or republic. The Vrishnis, Andhakas and other allied tribes of the Yadavas formed a *sangha* and Vasudeva (Krishna) is described as the *sangha-mukhya*. Mathura, the capital of Surasena, was also known at the time of Megasthenes as the centre of Krishna worship. The Surasena kingdom had lost its independence on annexation by the Magadhan empire.

Vajji

Vajji (Sanskrit: वज्जी) or **Vriji** was a confederacy of neighbouring clans including the Licchavis and one of the principal mahājanapadas of Ancient India. The area they ruled constitutes the region of Mithila in northern Bihar and their capital was the city of Vaishali.^[53]

Both the Buddhist text *Anguttara Nikaya* and the Jaina text *Bhagavati Sutra* (*Saya xv Uddesa I*) included Vajji in their lists of *solasa* (sixteen) mahājanapadas.^[54] The name of this mahājanapada was derived from one of its ruling clans, the Vṛjis. The Vajji state is indicated to have been a republic. This clan is mentioned by Pāṇini, Chanakya and Xuanzang.^[55]

Vamsa or Vatsa

The Vatsas or Vamsas are called to be an branch of the Kurus. The Vatsa or Vamsa country corresponded with the territory of modern Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. It had a monarchical form of government with its capital at Kausambi (identified with the village Kosam, 38 miles from Allahabad).^[56] Udayana was the ruler of Vatsa in the 7th century BCE, the time of Buddha. He was very powerful, warlike and fond of hunting. Initially king Udayana was opposed to Buddhism but later became a follower of Buddha and made Buddhism the state religion. Kausambi was a very prosperous city where a large number of wealthy merchants resided. It was the most important entrepot of goods and passengers from the north-west and south.

The period of the Vedas

Brahmarshi-deca, 'the county of the holy sages,' includes the territories of the Kurus, Matsyas, Panchalas and Curasenas (i.e., the eastern half of the State of Patiala and of the Delhi division of the Punjab, the Alwar State and adjacent territory in Rajputana, the region which lies between the Ganges and the Jumna, and the Muttra District in the United Provinces).^[57]

See also

- Iron Age India
- Epic India

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