

Chapter 5

Kingdoms, Kings and an Early Republic

- ❖ What is the present system of electing rulers in our country? Which one is better, the past one or the present one?
- ❖ Define Gana Sangh. Can you relate it to the present times of democracy?
- ❖ Do a quick research and find out were women really not allowed to gain knowledge and read the Vedas?
- ❖ What was the Ashwamedha Yajna? Why was it called so?

Do you know that the way of electing rulers or the way people became rulers was very much different from today? Let's learn how.

In the ancient times, people either elected rulers from their own community, choosing them on the basis of their strength, skills and intellect. Such elected governments were called gana-sangh. These were basically republics. The other way round was when very strong people subjugated lands and people, and made them accept their rule. These people had a long line of lineage who ruled the lands for years to come. These long lineage of families who ruled over an area for a long time came to be known as dynasties.

The rulers of these dynasties performed sacrifices such as the "Ashwamedha Yajna", according to which, the king performing the yajna left his horse freely to roam around the kingdoms and the ones who stopped it, had to fight a war with the king. The ones who did not, accept the king's power. It was performed by the "Pandavas" in Mahabharata and also by "Lord Ram" in Ramayana. We get an idea about such yajnas through the epics.

The Ashwamedha yajna included the kings who had accepted the power of the king performing the yajna, the family of the powerful king and the vish or jana. All of them brought gifts for the kings, and the priests performed rituals of the yajna. Shudras were excluded from participating in the yajnas.

Women and Vedas

We have a lot of misinformation regarding women and their inequality in the society. Many say that women were not allowed to read the Vedas, which is not true. Women, who vowed themselves to "Brahamacharya" were the ones who read the Vedas. There is a mention of many women in the Vedas who had their excellence in the Vedic knowledge like Lopamudra, Yami Vaivasvata, Sraddha, Ghosha, Surya, Indrani, Urvasi, Sarama, Juhu and Paulomi Saci and there are many such.

- ❖ How do you think the Varna system became a method of oppression?
- ❖ Write briefly about the making of kingdoms.
- ❖ How were the kings of the Janapada era different from the Rig Vedic age.

Varna System

People in the ancient Vedic civilization were divided on the basis of their work, that is varna, and there were four classes: Brahmin, the learned man, Kshatriya, the warrior class, Vaishya, the trader class and the last Shudra, the lowest working class. People in ancient India could choose what they wanted to be, as many Brahmins were Kshatriya and many Kshatriyas were Brahmins. It was a flexible system until the later Vedic age which made the system rigid, and the caste system began prevailing in the society, where the Brahmins had to follow the lineage of being Brahmins and the same was with the other classes.

The Making of Kingdoms: The History of Janapadas and The Becoming of Mahajanapadas

As mentioned in the previous chapters, people were into possessions of cattle rather than land. It was after a long time that people started settling at one place. Slowly, a group of people, of the same community started occupying a certain area. The place where they set their foot to settle came to be known as “Janapadas”. “Jana” means “people” and “pada” means foot.

- a. The people lived in huts and practised farming.
- b. Crops like wheat, barely, sesame and mustard were grown.
- c. Evidence of Painted Grey ware pottery, which were shiny and smooth, have been found.

The leader of the group started fighting for lands, and when they won battles with the other communities, they took over their “janapada”, and merged it into their own place. Slowly, about 2500 years ago, when numbers of “janapada” came under one king’s control, it became a “Mahajanapada”, that is a very large kingdom. These “Mahajanapadas” were considered really important because”

- a. They had a capital city.
- b. Had forts and they were fortified with strong and impressive walls to ensure protection of the kingdom
- c. Paid armies were maintained by the kings.
- d. Punched marked coins were also minted in the “Mahajanapada” era.

Taxes

Do you remember studying about the early men who wandered and practised hunting and gathering? And then do you remember studying about the ancient Indian civilizations: The Indus and The Early Vedic? Do you remember studying about taxes in those chapters? No, right.

The Vedic people gradually started developing their ways of maintaining a kingdom, and taxes was one of them. You very well know that we pay taxes to help the government run a large country like India efficiently. Let’s learn about the taxes in the “Mahajanapada” era.

- ❖ Do you think taxes made the kingdom more manageable?
- ❖ Why do you think that it was important for the kings to impose taxes?
- ❖ List three types of taxes.
- ❖ ELaborate about the news techniques in agriculture in the Janapada era.

Taxes became an important part of the kingdom's economy because:

- a. Large forts had to be built
- b. Armies had to be maintained

The Taxes that were procured were:

- a. Bhaga: 1/6th of the produce's share
- b. Craftsmen and weavers were supposed to work for one whole day at the king's palace
- c. Taxes were procured in the form of animals or their produce, like milk and meat
- d. Taxes on import and export of the goods
- e. A part of the forest produce was given to the king by the hunters

Modernising Agriculture: The Use of Iron Ploughshare and Transplanting

India has been into farming since ages, growing and adopting new natural techniques for better produce. Many sources like Puranas and Buddhists text mention about the Mahajanapadas. The two major changes in the agriculture during the era was:

- a. **Use of Iron Ploughshare:** Iron came to be in use of making weapons and tools for agriculture. Iron Ploughshare helped in better tilling of the soil which helped in the better produce of the farmer.
- b. **Transplanting:** Earlier, the farmers of that era would just scatter seeds, but afterwards, they adopted the technique of growing saplings and then planting them. This helped them grow crops more efficiently and in better numbers.

The Dasa and Dasis, the slaves that I mentioned you in the earlier chapters, were used for work like these. ***Find out about other works where these people were appointed.***

- ❖ **Do a quick research on Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya. Why are they important figures in ancient Indian history?**
- ❖ **What is Arthashastra?**
- ❖ **Compare Magadha and Vajji. Tell me how were they different.**

Magadha: The First Pan Indian Empire

Magadha is said to be one of the strongest and the most powerful empires of the Mahajanapada era. It is so because of the fertility of the soil as the Ganga and Son flowed through the kingdom and made it an important addition to the water transport and secondly because of the rulers who ruled it.

Magadha was in a state of crisis as the last Nanda ruler, Dhana Nanda, was not at all an efficient ruler. He was overthrown by Chandragupta Maurya, under the guidance of Chanakya. Magadha had an able administration under Chanakya, who was a great economist. He wrote the “Arthashastra” a treatise on economy and maintaining a kingdom. Magadha was a pan India empire, and even Alexander could not conquer it. Rajagriha, was the capital of Magadha followed by Patliputra, present day Patna.

Vajji: A Gana Sangh

Some mahajanapadas were ruled by a different form of government. They were not ruled by a particular king, but by a number of men who were elected in an assembly, who took decisions on different matters. Vajji was one such mahajanapada with Vaishali as its capital.

One major characteristic of Gana Sangh is that no single person from the assembly could take a decision alone, and had to call for a meeting to take up decisions for the kingdom. Everyone participated in the assembly, except the Shudras, Dasa, Dasis and Karmakars.

These kinds of government lasted for a very long time, and the last ones remained about 1500 years ago, and were then conquered by the Gupta Rulers, who are credited for glorious Indian history.

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