

HOW SOME MEN BECAME RULERS

Choosing leaders or rulers by voting is something that has become common during the last fifty years or so. How did men become rulers in the past?

But, around 3000 years ago, we find some changes taking place in the ways in which rajas were chosen. Some men now became recognised as rajas by performing very big sacrifices.

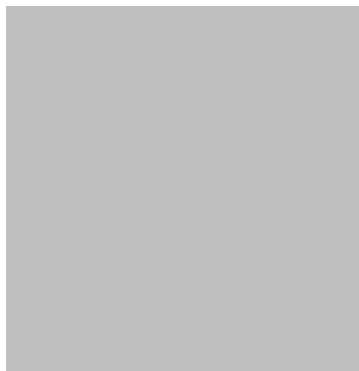
The ashvamedha or horse sacrifice was one such ritual. A horse was let loose to wander freely and it was guarded by the raja's men. If the horse wandered into the kingdoms of other rajas and they stopped it, they had to fight. If they allowed the horse to pass, it meant that they accepted that the raja who wanted to perform the sacrifice was stronger than them. These rajas were then invited to the sacrifice, which was performed by specially trained priests, who were rewarded with gifts. The raja who organised the sacrifice was recognised as being very powerful, and all those who came brought gifts for him.

The raja was a central figure in these rituals. He often had a special seat, a throne or a tiger skin. His charioteer, who was his companion in the battle field and witnessed his exploits, chanted tales of his glory. His relatives, especially his wives and sons, had to perform a variety of minor rituals. The other rajas were simply spectators who had to sit and watch the performance of the sacrifice. Priests performed the rituals including the sprinkling of sacred water on the king. The ordinary people, the vish or vaishya, also brought gifts. However, some people, such as those who were regarded as shudras by the priests, were excluded from many rituals.

Make a list of all those who would be present at the sacrifice. Which are the categories that are described in terms of their occupation?

JANAPADAS

The rajas who performed these big sacrifices were now recognised as being rajas of janapadas rather than janas. The word janapada literally means the land where the jana set its foot, and settled down. Archaeologists have excavated a number of settlements in these janapadas, such as Purana Qila in Delhi, Hastinapur near Meerut, and Atranjikhhera, near Etah (the last two are in Uttar Pradesh). They found that people lived in huts, and kept cattle as well as other animals. They also grew a variety of crops — rice, wheat, barley, pulses, sugarcane, sesame and mustard.



They made earthen pots. Some of these were grey in colour, others were red. One special type of pottery found at these sites is known as Painted Grey Ware. As is obvious from the name, these grey pots had painted designs, usually simple lines and geometric patterns.

MAHAJANAPADAS

About 2500 years ago, some janapadas became more important than others, and were known as mahajanapadas. Some of these are shown on Map 4. Most mahajanapadas had a capital city, many of these were fortified. This means that huge walls of wood, brick or stone were built around them.

Forts were probably built because people were afraid of attacks from other kings and needed protection. It is also likely that some rulers wanted to show how rich and powerful they were by building really large, tall and impressive walls around their cities. Also in this way, the land and the people living inside the fortified area could be controlled more easily by the king. Building such huge walls required a great deal of planning. Thousands, if not lakhs of bricks or stone had to be prepared. This in turn meant enormous labour, provided, possibly, by thousands of men, women and children. And resources had to be found for all of this.



The new rajas now began maintaining armies. Soldiers were paid regular salaries and maintained by the king throughout the year.



TAXES

As the rulers of the mahajanapadas were (a) building huge forts (b) maintaining big armies, they needed more resources. And they needed officials to collect these. So, instead of depending on occasional gifts brought by people, as in the case of the raja of the janapadas, they started collecting regular taxes.

- Taxes on crops were the most important. This was because most people were farmers. Usually, the tax was fixed at 1/6th of what was produced. This was known as bhaga or a share.
- There were taxes on crafts persons as well. These could have been in the form of labour. For example, a weaver or a smith may have had to work for a day every month for the king.
- Herders were also expected to pay taxes in the form of animals and animal produce.
- There were also taxes on goods that were bought and sold, through trade.
- And hunters and gatherers also had to provide forest produce to the raja.

What do you think would have been provided by hunters and gatherers?

CHANGES IN AGRICULTURE

There were two major changes in agriculture around this time. One was the growing use of iron ploughshares. This meant that heavy, clayey soil could be turned over better than with a wooden ploughshare, so that more grain could be produced. Second, people began transplanting paddy. This meant that instead of scattering seed on the ground, from which plants would sprout, saplings were grown and then planted in the fields. This led to increased production, as many more plants survived. However, it was back breaking work. Generally, slave men and women, (dasas and dasis) and landless agricultural labourers (kammakaras) had to do this work. Can you think why kings would encourage these changes?

A CLOSER LOOK :

- (A) **Magadha:** Magadha became the most important mahajanapada in about two hundred years. Many rivers such as the Ganga and Son flowed through Magadha. This was important for (a) transport, (b) water supplies (c) making the land fertile. Parts of Magadha were forested. Elephants, which lived in the forest, could be captured and trained for the army. Forests also provided wood for building houses, carts and chariots. Besides, there were iron ore mines in the region that could be tapped to make strong tools and weapons.

Magadha had two very powerful rulers, Bimbisara and Ajatasattu, who used all possible means to conquer other janapadas. Mahapadma Nanda was another important ruler. He extended his control up to the north-west part of the subcontinent. Rajagriha (present-day Rajgir) in Bihar was the capital of Magadha for several years.

Later the capital was shifted to Pataliputra (present-day Patna).

More than 2300 years ago, a ruler named Alexander, who lived in Macedonia in Europe, wanted to become a world conqueror. Of course, he didn't conquer the world, but did conquer parts of Egypt and West Asia, and came to the Indian subcontinent, reaching up to the banks of the Beas. When he wanted to march further eastwards, his soldiers refused. They were scared, as they had heard that the rulers of India had vast armies of foot soldiers, chariots and elephants.

In what ways were these armies different from those described in the Rigveda?

- (B) **Vajji:** While Magadha became a powerful kingdom, Vajji, with its capital at Vaishali (Bihar), was under a different form of government, known as gana or sangha.

In a gana or a sangha there were not one, but many rulers. Sometimes, even when thousands of men ruled together, each one was known as a raja. These rajas performed rituals together. They also met in assemblies, and decided what had to be done and how, through discussion and debate. For example, if they were attacked by an enemy, they met to discuss what should be done to meet the threat. However, women, dasas and kammakaras could not participate in these assemblies.

Both the Buddha and Mahavira belonged to ganas or sanghas. Some of the most vivid descriptions of life in the sanghas can be found in Buddhist books.

Rajas of powerful kingdoms tried to conquer the sanghas. Nevertheless, these lasted for a very long time, till about 1500 years ago, when the last of the ganas or sanghas were conquered by the Gupta rulers.