

Magadha: First amongst the Sixteen

Of all the states of the 6th century B.C., Magadha, Koshala, Vats and Avanti were the four prominent ones. The political history of India from 6th century B.C. onwards, is in fact, the history of struggle for supremacy among these states. Ultimately, Magadha emerged victorious in the struggle and by the 5th century B.C. it became the most powerful and the largest state of India. The Magadha empire played a vital role in the politics of India till 4th century B.C.

Factors leading to the prominence of Magadha

Following were the main factors contributing to the prominence of Magadha:

1. Magadh's advantageous geographical position contributed greatly in its expansion. The

Magadha empire was bounded on the north by the Ganges, on the west by the river Sone and on the east by the river Champa. The spurs of the Vindhyas guarded it on the south. Thus the Magadha empire was secured from all the sides.

2. Both the capitals of the Magadha empire, Rajgir⁹ and Pataliputra¹⁰, were situated at very strategic points. Surrounded by a group of five hills, Rajgir had become quite impregnable. Pataliputra was situated at the confluence of the Ganga, the Gandak and the Sone. Thus Pataliputra occupied a pivotal position commanding communications on all sides.
3. According to early Buddhist and Jaina writers, the rulers like Bimbisara, Ajatashatru and Mahapadma Nanda made a remarkable contribution in the expansion of the empire. They, by their policies, expanded and strengthened their kingdom and transformed it into a large empire.
4. The huge iron deposits (in modern Jharkhand) played a vital role in the expansion of the Magadha empire. Richest iron deposits were situated not far away from Rajgir, the capital of Magadha. The ready availability of the rich iron ores in the neighbourhood of the capital enabled the Magadha kings to make themselves equipped with effective weapons. On the other, the effective iron weapons were not easily available to their rivals.
5. Magadha was a very prosperous empire. Being situated in the middle Gangetic plain, it had very fertile land. The jungles had been cleared off with the help of the iron tools and instruments and the area had sufficient rainfall. Thus, the farmers were able to produce considerable

6. Magadha had a large army. It was composed of infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots. The army was equipped with effective weapons of iron. Magadh was the first state to have a powerful elephant unit in its army. The elephants, in particular, were used in storming fortresses. Elephants were more useful than horses in marching over marshy areas. Undoubtedly, the large and powerful army made a significant contribution in the expansion of the Magadha empire.

7. Magadha was more progressive as compared to other states. Here, the people known as non-Aryans were in majority and they were against the growth of orthodox and Brahmanical systems in the society. Thus, (Magadha was more liberal as compared to other states and the Magadhan people were very enthusiastic for the expansion of their kingdom.)

(All these factors made an important contribution in the expansion of the Magadha empire and it developed into the first empire of India.)