



TOWARDS THE FORMATION OF THE STATE

The state is a term we often take for granted. What exactly do we mean by it? Usually, we associate the state with certain forms of government. These could be monarchies or republics, or in some instances, oligarchis. i.e. the rule of few. These distinctions rest on the way power, i.e. the ability to influence and control the lives of people, is either concentrated in the hands of a few or shared amongst many.

Those who control states, whom we identify as rulers, regulate political relations, and function through a variety of institutions. These include administrative services, used for a range of functions such as revenue collection, the army, and judiciary. Rulers also try to convince people that the form of government that they head is ideal. In other words, they try to legitimize the existence of the state.

States have developed over a long period of time, and in different ways. In this lesson we will explore some of the earliest trends in the subcontinent.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- distinguish between chiefdoms and kingdoms;
- explain the feature of early kingdoms and
- understand how some of these early kingdoms became powerful states.

29.1 THE BACKGROUND

In earlier lessons you may have studied about the Harappan civilization. This was a very well-developed civilization, with large cities, where people produced a wide variety of things. Some scholars have suggested that there must have been a state organization in the Harappan civilization. This is very likely, but we do not have the evidence to figure out what kind of state this was, and we do not have details about administrative institutions.

(i) Chiefdoms in Early Vedic Literature

You have read about the Rigveda in earlier lessons (lesson 4). The Rigveda was probably composed between 1800-1000 BC. This is a collection of hymns addressed to various gods, in particular to Agni, Indra and Soma. Generally, the hymns were



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composed by members of priestly families. They were usually chanted when sacrifices were performed, and were used to invite the gods to the rituals. Most of the hymns were composed in north – west India, in the region drained by the Indus and its tributaries.

The hymns also contain other information. They include lists of things for which people prayed. And they occasionally give us the names of chiefs or important men of those times.

Do the hymns provide us the information about the political processes? Well, the answer is a qualified yes. The hymns do not provide us with direct information about political events (except in some rare instances). At the same time, the contents of the hymns can be analyzed to understand how political relations were organized.

(ii) Rajas with a difference

Generally, when we use the term raja we have an idea that this is a man who lives in a palace, has a large number of servants under his command, is extremely rich, is the head of a large army, and has a court. And we usually think of rajas passing down their power to their sons. Preferably the eldest son. Yet, the term raja did not always have this meaning.

In the Rigveda, the term raja is used as an adjective for a number of gods. It is also occasionally used to describe powerful men. These men did not control a vast army or a large administrative system. Their main source of power was probably derived from leadership in warfare. Let us see why battles were fought, and what happened after that.

29.1.4 Battles

You may remember that the Rigveda indicates that people at that time were primarily farmers. So we find that some battles were fought to acquire pasture land. Usually, the best pasture lands were along rivers. Battles were also fought for water for both people and animals, to capture cattle and land, especially for pasture, and for growing hardy crops that ripened quickly, such as barley. Besides, battles were fought to capture women.

Most men took part in these wars. There was no regular army, but there were assemblies where people met and discussed matters of war and peace. They also choose leaders, brave and skillful warriors. Sometimes, they performed special sacrifices and prayed to the gods for success in battle.

What happened if the raja led his people to victory? Lands that were won or water sources to which access was gained were probably held and used in common. Other things, such as cattle and women, were probably distributed amongst the raja's supporters. Some of these were given to priests, who performed sacrifices both to pray for the victory of the raja as well as to thank the gods for supporting their ruler when he was victorious.

Who did they fight with? The Rigveda contains the names of a number of tribes. These include the Purus, Yadus, Bharatas, Anus, and Druhus. Sometime these tribes united with one another, but they also fought with one another. Sometimes, these people, who called themselves Aryas, fought with others, whom they called Dasas or Dasyus.

We find two terms being used for the common people. One is the word jana, which is often used in Hindi and other languages even today. The other is the term vis. Usually,

**Notes**

the raja is referred to as the raja of a jana or a vis. In other words, the raja was not regarded as the raja of a kingdom or a fixed territory, but of a group of people.

As we have seen, these rajas are not quite like those we are familiar with. They have often been regarded as chiefs rather than kings, and the realm over which they exercised control has been defined as a chiefdom rather than as a kingdom.

- Chiefs are usually chosen by the people, either directly or indirectly, whereas kings are hereditary.
- Chiefs usually do not have any permanent administrative mechanism to support them: they depend on the support of kinsfolk and other followers. While kings may also depend on their relatives for support, they have additionally, an administrative system to depend on.
- Chiefs do not collect regular taxes: instead, they often depend on gifts that may be brought in by their followings. Kings may receive gifts, but their major source of revenue is usually derived from tax collection.
- Chiefs do not maintain standing armies: they depend on militia, i.e. people who are called upon to fight as and when necessary, and who are not paid regular salaries. Kings may continue to recruit people as militia, but usually also maintain standing armies.
- Generally, chiefs interact with people in assemblies, where people can express their opinions on important matters. Kings also participate in assemblies, but these tend to be more formal occasions.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.1**

1. The Rigveda was probably composed between _____ , _____ B.C.
2. The hymns do not provide us with direct information about _____ events.
3. Usually the best pastures lands are along _____ .
4. The people who called themselves as Aryas, fought with others, whom they called _____ or _____ .

29.2 THE EARLIEST KINGDOMS: JANAPADAS

Between about 1000 BC and 500 BC, certain important developments took place in north India. We now find a growth in the number of settlements, often associated with the Painted Grey Ware culture about which you have learnt in lesson five. Amongst other things, settled agriculture became more important, there was a growth in population, and iron was increasingly used to make tools and weapons.

We also have a very elaborate set of texts, which we refer to as the later Vedic literature. These texts deal with rituals, explaining them, analyzing them, and describing how they were to be performed incidentally, they suggest that a new form of political organization that is often referred as the janapada was now becoming more important.

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As is obvious, the term janapada was derived from the word jana, which, as we have seen, referred to people. In fact, janapada means where the jana places its feet and settles down. The land was now named after them. For example, the land where the Kurus settled down was known as Kuru janapada.

Another distinctive feature of the janapadas was that the population living in these territories was often classified according to varna, the four fold social classification about which you learnt in lesson four.

29.3 NEW WAYS OF BECOMING OF RAJA

The leader or chief of the janapada continued to be called a raja. But there were important ways in which this raja was different from that of the jana. To start with, we have indications that in some cases at least, the position of the raja was now hereditary. In other words, sons inherited or could legitimately claim the kingdom of their fathers.

Secondly, we now find mention of elaborate rituals, of which the rajasuya and the asvamedha are the most well known. These were long, sometimes lasting for more than a year. Only specially trained priests could perform them. The priests who composed and compiled Vedic literature now stated that whoever was capable of performing these elaborate rituals would be recognized as king.

Many people were expected to take part in such sacrifices. These included the raja. This was major occasion for declaring his power. His family, especially his wives and sons, had to help him in the sacrifices. His other supporters, including the chariot driver, family priest, (purohita), head of the army, messengers also joined in. The common people, the vis or vaishya, were expected to bring gifts for the raja, which provided much of the wealth needed to perform the sacrifice. Neighbouring rajas were often invited to watch the spectacle. And of course priests conducted the entire ritual.

Could shudras take part in the rituals? Sometimes they were given small roles in the rituals, but very often they were excluded from them. Even those who participated could only play their own parts. For example, the vaishya could not act as priest, nor could the raja's wife take his place.

What did these rituals entail? In the case of the asvamedha or the horse sacrifice, the sacrificial horse was let loose to wander for a year, accompanied by a group of armed men. All those who allowed the horse to pass through tacitly acknowledged the authority of the owner of the horse.

When the horse was brought back, it was sacrificed in an elaborate ritual. Large numbers of people, including other rulers, priests, and common people, were invited to participate in and/or witness the event. There was feasting and story-telling as well. In other words, this was an enormous, expensive ceremony.

Any aspiring ruler who wanted to perform such a ritual had to be both powerful and wealthy. The priests were rewarded with large sacrificial fees or daksina. These could include horses, cattle, gold and silver objects, chariots, cloths, and slave men and women, amongst other things. Thus, by performing the ritual successfully, the raja was able to make a public announcement, as well as a display of this power.

Many of these rituals included an abhiseka. This meant a sprinkling of the ruler with purified, holy water. Usually, the first sprinkling was done by the priest, though others, such as the vaishya and the ruler's relatives, could also participate in the process.



As you can see, there was now no question of popular assembly choosing a raja. A man could become a raja if he was born into a ruling family, or try to become one if he had adequate military and material resources.

29.4 THE BEGINNINGS OF AN ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

One of the rituals frequently described in later Vedic text in the rajasuya. If you are familiar with the story of the Mahabharat, you may remember that the rajasuya was an important sacrifice that was performed by Udhisthira in order to claim the throne.

As part of the rajasuya, there is mention of a ritual known as *he ratninam havimsi*. This is a ritual in which the raja was expected to make offerings in the homes of important people, referred to as ratnins, (literally those who possessed jewels). These important people included the wives of the ruler, the leader of the army, the chief priest, the charioteer, and some other, including messengers and those who collected or received gifts on behalf of the ruler.

There is no mention of regular salaries being paid to these “officials.” However, given their functions, we can suggest that some of them perhaps formed the nucleus from which later administrative system developed.

29.5 RESOURCES FOR THE RAJA

Although the raja who rules over the janapada was in many ways different from the raja as described in the Rigveda, he shared certain features with him as well. We find that even during this period, the main ways in which the raja could acquire resources was through battle, and through gifts.

These gifts, often referred to as bali, could be demanded on rituals occasions. For examples, if the raja was performing an *asvamedha*, he could demand resources from his people. While the term “gift” suggests a voluntary offering. People could be persuaded and perhaps even forced to make gifts.

We find that the texts use certain new analogies to describe the relationship between the raja and his people. The raja is described as the cater, or the deer and the people as the food or the fodder. This does suggest that people were occasionally exploited even though regular taxes were not demanded.

At the same time, people may have made offering to the raja in order to win his support, and to ensure that he was both able and willing to protect them from other rulers.

Another similarity between the raja of the Rigveda and the raja of the later Vedic tradition was the dependence on a militia for armed support. Can you think about why the ruler may not have been able to maintain a standing army?

29.6 MAHAJANAPADAS

By about 500 BC, some janapadas became more powerful than the others and were now known as mahajanpadas. Buddhist and Jaina text provide us with lists of 16 mahajanapadas. The more important amongst these, as well as their capital cities, are shown on the map. (please see table no. 5.1 in Book 1 p 67 and map on 68)

For janapadas were particularly important. These were those of Kosala, Avanti, Vajji, and Magadha. Of these, ultimately Magadha became the most powerful janapada. The Mauryan empire, the first known empire in the history of the subcontinent, had its centre in Magadha.

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The mahajanapadas differed from the janapadas in a ways. Let us look at some of these differences.

29.7 FORTIFIED CITIES

Almost all the mahajanpads had a capital city. Unlike the settlements in the janapadas many of these were fortified. This means that huge walls of wood, brick or stone were build around them.

We have some idea of the people who lived in these cities. These included the rulers and their supporters, and other such as craftsmen, merchants, traders, and small shop keepers. Some of the people who lived in such cities were wealthy men and women. Many of the cities that we know today developed during this period. These include cities like Mathura, Varanasi, Vaishali and Pataliputra. These cities were sustained by developments in agriculture, where, with the use of the iron tools, it now became possible to produce more food.

Forts were probably built because some of the people who lived in cities were afraid of attacks and needed protection. It is also likely that some rulers wanted to show how rich and powerful they were building really large, tall, impressive walls around their cities.

Building such huge walls required a great deal of planning. Thousands, if not lakh of bricks of stone had to be prepared. This in turn meant enormous labour, provided, possible, by thousands of men, women and children. And of course, money had to be found to pay for all of this.

29.8 NEW ARMIES

By about 330 BC, we have evidence to suggest that the armies in some of these mahajanpadas were organized differently. This was the time when Alexander, a ruler of Macadonia, to the north of Greece, decided to embark on an expedition to conquer the world. As may be expected, he did not conquer the world. However, he conquered part of Egypt, West Asia and came to the Indian subcontinent, reaching up to the banks of the Beas.

When he wanted to move 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.

These armies were very different from the ones mentioned earlier. Soldiers in the new army were paid regular salaries and maintained by the king throughout the year. We also find elephants being used on a large scale. If we remember that elephants are difficult to capture, tame and train, it becomes evident that now armies have become far more elaborate and well organized than before. And maintaining such large armies would have required far more resources than what was needed for the simple armies of the janapadas.

We learn from Buddhist texts that the rulers of Magadha build up on the best armies. They used elephants found in the forests within the state. They also used iron from the mines within their kingdom. This provided the army with strong weapons.

A well-equipped army, led by ambitious rulers, meant that the ruler of Magadha could soon overcome most other rulers, and expand control over neighbouring areas. In



some cases, the rulers tries to acquire control over routes of communication, both overland and along rivers. In other cases, they tried to acquire control over land, especially over fertile agricultural land, as this was an important means of acquiring more resources.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.2**

Fill in the Blanks

1. Almost all the Mahajanapadas had a _____ city.
2. Building such huge walls required a great deal of _____.
3. These cities were sustained by development in agriculture, where with the use of iron tools it now became possible to _____ more _____.
4. Alexander conquered part of Egypt, West Asia, came to the Indian subcontinent, reaching up to the banks of the _____.

29.9 REGULAR TAXES

As the rulers of the mahajanapadas were building huge forts maintaining big armies, they needed a regular supply of money. So collecting taxes became very important.

- Taxes on crops were the most important. This was because most people were farmers. They often depended on the ruler for protection of their land and crops. Usually, the tax fixed at 1/6th of what was produced on the land. This tax was known as bhaga.
- There were taxes on craft as well. These were usually in the form of labour. So, for example, a weaver or a smith had to work for a day every month for the government. Herders were also expected to pay taxes.
- There were also taxes on goods that were bought and sold, through trade.

And of course the king needed many officials to collect taxes and more money to pay their salaries.

Some taxes were collected in the form of goods, such as grain, and cattle, or things produced by craftsmen. Sometimes taxes were collected in cash. In fact, some of the earlier coins belong to this period.

29.10 MAGADHA AND ITS RULERS

Magadha became the most important mahajanapada in about two hundred years. This was partly because of the Magadhan army (see above).

Besides, Magadha was surrounded by rivers, included the Ganga and Son. This was important for transport, water supplies and fertile land.

Magadha had two very powerful rulers, Bimbisara and his son Ajatashatrum who use all possible means to overcome their rivals and conquer other janapadas. Sometimes, they entered into marriage alliances with neighbouring rulers. In other instances, they led armies into and actually conquered neighbouring states.



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Mahapadma Nada was another important ruler or Magadha. He extended his control up to the northwest part of the subcontinent. It is likely that Alexander’s soldiers had heard about his vast army.

We do not hear of the rulers of Magadha performing large-scale sacrifices. Can you think of any reasons why they would not have performed these elaborate rituals?

29.11 GANA SANGHAS

While many mahajanapada were ruled by individuals rajas, some were under a different form of government, and were known as gana sanghas. Here there were not one, but many rulers. Interestingly, sometimes even when thousands of men ruled together, each one was known as a raja.

These rajas performed rituals together. These rituals were not like the Vedic sacrifices. They also met in assemblies, and decided what had to be done and how, through discussion and debate. For examples, if they were attacked by enemy, they met in their assembly to discuss what should be done to meet the threat. And instead of standing armies, we find that the rajas all joined together, with their followers, to form an army as and when required.

All the land of the gana sanghas was owned by all the rajas together (jointly). They usually got slaves and labourers known as **dasa karmakaras** to cultivate the land. These men and women were given some food, clothing and shelter, but everything else they produced was taken by the rajas and there relatives.

Some of the most well known gana sanghas were those of the Mallas and the Vajjis. The Vajji gana sangha was regarding as a mahajanapada, with famous city of Vaishali as its capital. Both the Buddha and Mahavira belonged to gana sanghas. Some of the most vivid descriptions of life in the gana sanghas can be found in Buddhist books.

So, as you can see, not all mahajanapadas had an identical form of government.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.3

1. Which was the most powerful janapadas?

2. Which means of transports and communication were used to acquire control routes by the armies of Magadha?

3. How much tax of the agricultural produce was taken by the ruler?

4. Name any two powerful rulers of Magadha.

**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

The formation of the state can be traced to Early Vedic Period where the chiefdoms gradually gave way to formation of kingdom as a result of battle for pasture land.

The battles fought used a range from fight among tribes or a group of tribes fighting against other group tribes. The early kingdom called as Janapadas gradually gave way to Mahajanapads characterized by stone walled fojet, large number of servants, huge armies. There were different ways in which the raja or chief was different from the common people called janas.

Gradually the position of the raja became hereditary. He had a large army which required huge expenses to maintain it. These were met through taxes on crops, taxes on craft and goods.

An interesting concept was that of Gana Sanghas meaning rule of many rulers, each called a raja. These rajas performed rituals together. They met in assemblies and decided what had to be done? The land of the gana samaghas was owned by all the rajas jointly.

**TERMINAL EXERCISES**

1. What is Rigveda?
2. Why were the battles fought?
3. Distinguish between 'a chiefdon' and a 'kingdom'?
4. Name any four tribes as described in Rigveda?
5. Explain the new ways of becoming a raja?
6. Explain why collecting taxes was important?

**ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS****29.1**

1. 1800-1000 B.C.
2. Political.
3. Rivers.
4. Dasas of Dasuyu

29.2

1. Capital
2. Planning
3. Produce, food
4. Beas

**Notes**

**Notes****29.3**

1. Magadha
2. Overland and along rivers
3. 1/6
4. Bambishara, Ajatsharu and ahapadma Nanda (any two)

HINTS FOR TERMINAL EXERCISES

1. Refer 29.1.2
2. Refer 29.1.4
3. Refer 29.1.4 Rest five points.
4. Refer 29.1.4 para 4.
5. Refer 29.3.
6. Refer 29.5.