



The Causes of the Rise of Magadha: A Review

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Abstract : The kingdom of Magadha started its rise to pre-eminence during the period of Bimbisara and finally became the first great empire in India by the time of the Nandas. Various ambitious and powerful rulers of different successive dynasties contributed to its rise. But certain other geographical, economic and cultural factors also contributed to its rise. There were certain permanent factors which enabled it to rise to zenith of political greatness more than once. It remained the seat of power for many successive empires in India.

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Magadha occupied a strategic position of geographical importance. The river Ganges and its tributaries Son, Gandak and Gagra served as admirable means for defence, communication and trade. The older capital Rajagriha was protected by seven hills and the later one; Pataliputara being at the junction of the Ganges and the Son had natural means of defence.

Introduction : The natural facilities of communication and trade both with North India and the sea helped it in its economic prosperity. The land of Magadha was also fertile which yielded rich harvests. Therefore, land taxes could be kept high which proved to be regular and substantial sources of income to the state without which the maintenance of a big army could not be possible and the empire could neither be built up nor consolidated.

The taxes Bali and Bhag had now become compulsory and the peasants had no choice but to pay them. The state imposed further taxes on labour and peasants and collected good money by trade-tax as well.

Because of increased financial resources, Magadh was the first state in north India to keep a standing army and Bimbisara the first such ruler. Besides, while neighbouring forests provided timber for building and elephants for the army, its own iron-ore deposits made profitable the manufacture of better implements and weapons and a profitable trade in iron.

Magadh was again the first state in India which manufactured better arms and equipment of war made of iron. All this helped in making Magadha an economically prosperous and militarily strong state which helped in its rise.



Culturally, Magadha, being in the East, was a place where a balanced synthesis between the Aryan and the non-Aryan cultures took place. The Brahmanic culture could not claim dominance in Magadha because by the time it reached there it had lost much of its strength and therefore, liberal traditions in religion and society could be maintained in Magadha.

Prof H.C. Ravchaudhari writes “In their realm Brahmanas could fraternize with Vratyas, Kshatriyas could admit plebian (Sudra) girls to their harem, blue-blooded aristocrats could be done to death or otherwise deprived of the throne to make room for the child of a ‘Nagar-Sobhini’ and a barber could aspire to imperial dignity.”

Jainism and Buddhism both of which took their birth within the territories of Magadha were, probably, the results of these liberal traditions and they participated in further enhancing these traditions “It (Magadha),” writes Prof H.C. Ravchaudhari, “played a part in the evolution of universal religion as it did in the foundation of a pan-Indian empire. ” Liberal traditions, particularly a sense of social equality and catholicity of religious ideas, further strengthened by Jainism and Buddhism, also contributed to the building of a strong empire in Magadha.

Dr Radha Kumud Mookerji writes, “The laxity of social restrictions imposed by the orthodox Brahmanical culture and universal aspect of Buddhism and Jainism which found a congenial home in the Magadha must have considerably widened the political outlook of this region and contributed to make it the nucleus of a mighty empire.”

The administrative system of Magadha, wherein the state was ruled by a hereditary monarch who had the opportunity to enhance his financial and military resources, was also one of the causes of its rise. The powers of the king had increased under monarchical-state. In the previous tribal-system, the king got only a part of the booty of the war. In the new system, he could keep it all for himself.

The kings now, besides Bali, started collecting other taxes as well like Bhaga and Kara. They extorted money from their subjects by several illegal means also. All that made different states financially strong which enabled kings to maintain standing armies. Bimbisara of Magadha was the first king among monarchical states of that time who kept a standing army and there is no doubt that it certainly, helped in the rise of Magadha.



The various powerful rulers of different dynasties contributed to the rise of Magadha. The foundation of the Magadha empire was laid down by Bimbisara and Ajatasatru. Both were ambitious rulers and extended the boundaries of Magadha both by war and diplomacy. “The accounts of the reign of Bimbisara and Ajatasatru” writes Dr A.L. Basham. “give evidence of a definite policy, aimed at the control of as much of the course of the Ganges as possible.”

Dr Basham also points out that the idea of a big empire was picked up by Bimbisara and Ajatasatru from the example of Cyrus, the Great of Persia, who had become a ruler only sixteen years earlier than Bimbisara in Magadha and succeeded in building up Persia as the seat of one of the greatest empires of the world. He writes, “It is hardly likely that the kings of Magadha were ignorant of what was happening in the North-West. We believe that their expansionist policy was in part inspired by the example of Persians.”

The contention of Dr Basham definitely has practical wisdom but it is also a fact that Indian rulers had no compulsion to look to any foreign country for the ideal of an imperial kingdom. Rajasuya and Asvamedha ceremonies were performed by Indian rulers for the extension of their empires right from the later Vedic age onwards. After Ajatasatru, Sisunaga pursued the policy of empire-building and succeeded.

Then came the Nandas who, finally, succeeded in establishing the first great empire in India. The Nanda rulers were Shudras. They were despotic rulers, who oppressed their subjects and collected enormous wealth in the state-treasury. Their rule, therefore, was unpopular which led to their weakness and contributed towards the downfall of their empire. Yet, the Nandas have their importance in Indian history.

They created a most extensive empire in India and left it to their successors, the Mauryas in a position when it was extremely prosperous and militarily strong so that the Mauryas became powerful enough to turn the foreigners, the Greeks, out of India and also succeeded in completing the task began by Bimbisara and Ajatasatru of consolidating India in a big empire.

Besides, the Nandas participated in weakening the caste-system during their time. Dr R.K. Mookerji writes: “The 5th and the 6th centuries B.C. hold out strange phenomenon before us. Kshatriya Chiefs founding popular religious sects which menaced Vedic religion and Shudra leaders establishing a big empire in Aryavarta on the ruins of Kshatriya kingdoms.”



Conclusion : The ambitious rulers of Magadha, its geographical location, fertility of its land, its minerals and forests and, thereby, its economic prosperity and liberal cultural traditions of the people of Magadha helped in its rise and in making it the first imperial power of India.

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