

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional

Period of Mahajanapadas

Paper 1 · Unit 6

Second urbanisation, the sixteen states, the rise of Magadha and the heterodox challenge: 50 marks in four years, with the Jainism and Buddhism question a recurring favourite.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Period of Mahajanapadas: formation of states, Mahajanapada; republics and monarchies; rise of urban centres; trade routes; economic growth; introduction of coinage; spread of Jainism and Buddhism; rise of Magadha and Nandas; Iranian and Macedonian invasions and their impact.

The second urbanisation

This is the material foundation on which every other part of the unit rests, and the 2025 paper asked about it directly through the agrarian expansion of eastern India.

- Between roughly the sixth and fourth centuries BCE the middle Ganga valley saw the appearance of cities, coinage, writing and states, a process conventionally called the **second urbanisation** after the Harappan first.
- **Iron technology** made the difference, since iron axes cleared the dense monsoon forest of the middle Ganga and iron ploughshares turned its heavy alluvial soil, both of which stone and copper could not do.
- **Wet rice transplantation** was the second variable, giving surpluses far above what wheat and barley yielded in the west, and **R. S. Sharma** built his account of the period on the combination of iron and rice.
- That thesis has been qualified, with **A. Ghosh** and later archaeologists noting that iron appears earlier than urbanism and that the causal link is not automatic, so the surplus explanation should be stated as an argument.
- **Northern Black Polished Ware**, a fine luxury ceramic, is the archaeological marker of the period and its distribution maps the extent of the new urban culture.
- Cities that emerge include **Rajagriha, Pataliputra, Kaushambi, Shravasti, Champa, Varanasi, Ujjain, Taxila and Vaishali**, and several are named in both Buddhist and Jain texts.
- **Surplus made states possible**, since a settled agricultural surplus can be taxed to support an army, a bureaucracy and a priesthood, and the **bali, bhaga and shulka** appear as regular exactions rather than voluntary offerings.
- **Sixteen mahajanapadas** is itself a Buddhist and Jain framing rather than a neutral one, since both traditions listed the states of their own north Indian world and omitted the south entirely, so the number reflects the sources rather than the subcontinent.
- Craft specialisation and the **shreni** or guild appear in the same period, with texts naming eighteen guilds, and the guild functioned as employer, trainer, banker and quasi-judicial body for its members.
- Writing reappears with **Brahmi**, and though the earliest securely dated examples are Ashokan, most scholars accept that the script was in use commercially before that.

KEY TERMS

Second urbanisation — The emergence of cities, coinage, writing and states in the middle Ganga valley from about the sixth century BCE.

Shreni — A craft or merchant guild that trained, employed, banked and adjudicated for its members.

Republics and monarchies

The sixteen mahajanapadas divide into two constitutional types, and the contrast between them is one of the most examinable ideas in ancient Indian history.

- Buddhist texts, principally the **Anguttara Nikaya**, and the Jain **Bhagavati Sutra** list the **sixteen mahajanapadas**, and the lists differ slightly, which is itself worth noting.
- **Monarchies** included Magadha, Kosala, Vatsa and Avanti, and these four came to dominate the rest by the fifth century BCE.
- **Gana-sanghas**, often translated as republics, included the **Vajji or Licchavi confederacy at Vaishali, the Shakyas of Kapilavastu, the Mallas of Kusinara and Pava, and the Koliyas**.
- Government in the gana-sanghas ran through an **assembly of the kshatriya clan heads** meeting in a santhagara, deciding by vote with a teller called the salaka-gahapaka, and the Buddha's own account of Vajjian practice in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta is the fullest description.
- The term republic misleads, because participation was restricted to the ruling clan and excluded women, dasas and karmakaras, so **oligarchy** is the more accurate description.
- Monarchies had structural advantages that decided the contest: a **permanent standing army, a taxation system reaching the whole population, and unified command**, none of which an assembly of clan heads could match.
- **A. S. Altekar, K. P. Jayaswal and Romila Thapar** have all written on the gana-sanghas, with Jayaswal's early nationalist reading of them as indigenous democracy now regarded as overstated.
- The 2025 question about territorial republics arising as a reaction against the later Vedic pattern of life reflects a real argument, that the gana-sanghas grew in regions where Brahmanical ritual and monarchy had penetrated least.
- Their location in the **Himalayan foothills and eastern margins** supports that reading, and it also explains why both Mahavira and the Buddha came from gana-sangha families.

Trade, coinage and economic growth

Named explicitly in the syllabus. The introduction of coinage is a genuine turning point and it is frequently asked as a sub-part.

- **Punch-marked coins** in silver and copper, called **karshapana** or pana, are India's earliest coinage, bearing symbols punched by issuing authorities rather than legends or portraits.
- Their appearance indicates a **monetised exchange economy**, standardised weights and a level of trust in issuing authority that barter does not require.
- **Uttarapatha**, the northern route from the Ganga delta through Kaushambi and Mathura to Taxila and beyond, and **Dakshinapatha**, running south towards Pratishthana, structured long distance trade.
- **Shreshthis**, wealthy merchants and financiers, appear prominently in Buddhist and Jain texts, and **Anathapindika of Shravasti** is the best known, having reportedly bought the Jetavana grove by covering it in coins.
- **Usury** was practised at recorded rates, and Brahmanical texts disapproved of it while the heterodox traditions did not, which is one reason merchants supported them.
- **Gahapati**, the householder or landowner, becomes a central social category in this period, and the term marks the emergence of a propertied class outside the varna hierarchy's top tier.

- Trade goods included textiles, ivory, precious stones, metals and horses, and contact with the **Achaemenid empire** after the annexation of Gandhara brought Indian goods into a wider network.
- Urban prosperity is the key to the heterodox appeal, since merchants and artisans possessed wealth without ritual status and were disadvantaged by a Brahmanical order that placed them below the twice-born.

The rise of Jainism and Buddhism

Asked in 2025 through the claim that the ideological challenge was rooted in socio-economic transformation in eastern India. That question wants the material explanation, not the doctrine alone.

- **Vardhamana Mahavira**, traditionally 599 to 527 BCE, was the twenty fourth tirthankara following **Parshvanatha**, and Jain tradition therefore treats the religion as far older than the sixth century.
- Jain doctrine rests on the **three jewels** of right faith, right knowledge and right conduct, on the five vows of ahimsa, satya, asteya, aparigraha and brahmacharya, and on **anekantavada**, the doctrine of many-sidedness.
- **Siddhartha Gautama**, conventionally 563 to 483 BCE though many scholars now prefer a later date, taught the **Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path**, and the doctrines of anatta and anicca.
- Both founders came from **kshatriya gana-sangha families**, both taught in **Prakrit rather than Sanskrit**, and both rejected Vedic ritual, animal sacrifice and the authority of the Brahmin, which is the common structural profile.
- Socio-economic explanation for their appeal runs: the new merchant and artisan classes were ritually subordinated by Brahmanism, and both religions offered spiritual worth independent of birth while approving of accumulated wealth honestly earned.
- **Animal sacrifice** was economically damaging in an agrarian economy dependent on cattle for ploughing and dairy, so ahimsa had a material as well as an ethical constituency.
- **Merchant patronage** is documented at length, with donations recorded in Buddhist inscriptions from a wide range of occupational groups, and monasteries positioned along trade routes.
- **Romila Thapar** and **R. S. Sharma** both argue this material case, while **Uma Chakravarti** adds that the heterodox orders drew on a wider social base including women, who could join the sangha as bhikkhunis.
- Caution to state: neither religion abolished caste in practice, both accepted royal patronage that reintroduced hierarchy, and the Buddhist sangha itself developed internal ranking, so the egalitarian claim needs qualification.

The rise of Magadha and the Nandas

Why one of sixteen states absorbed the rest is a classic causation question, and the answer is geographic and economic before it is dynastic.

- **Haryanka dynasty** under **Bimbisara** from about 544 BCE expanded through matrimonial alliance with Kosala, Vaishali and Madra, and through the annexation of Anga which gave access to the Ganga delta.

- **Ajatashatru** completed the conquest of the Vajji confederacy after a long campaign, reportedly using the **rathamusala** scythed chariot and the **mahashilakantaka** catapult, and Buddhist sources credit his minister Vassakara with dividing the Licchavis by intrigue.
- **Shishunaga** and then the **Nandas** followed, with **Mahapadma Nanda** described as ekarat, the sole sovereign, and as a destroyer of all kshatriyas, indicating a ruler of non-kshatriya origin.
- Nanda wealth and army are attested by Greek sources, which report an enormous force of infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants, and it is generally accepted that this deterred Alexander's troops from advancing beyond the Beas.
- Geographic advantages were decisive: **iron ore at Rajgir and Dhalbhum**, alluvial fertility, control of the Ganga for transport and revenue, and access to elephants from the eastern forests.
- **Capital position** mattered, with Rajagriha ringed by hills and later Pataliputra sited at the confluence of the Ganga, Son and Gandak, which made it both defensible and commercially dominant.
- **Political method** was ruthless and effective, combining conquest, matrimonial alliance and the absorption of neighbours, and the Magadhan rulers were notably unconstrained by Brahmanical convention.
- **Pataliputra** was fortified under the Nandas and became the imperial capital thereafter, and Megasthenes later described it as a wooden-palisaded city with 570 towers, a description partly confirmed by excavation at Bulandi Bagh.
- **Nanda unpopularity**, attributed in the sources to heavy taxation and low birth, prepared the ground for Chandragupta Maurya's overthrow of the dynasty around 321 BCE.

The Iranian and Macedonian invasions

Asked in 2026 on whether they reshaped ancient India through administrative influence, political transformation and cultural interaction. The honest answer weighs real effects against exaggerated ones.

- **Cyrus** reached the northwest in the sixth century BCE and **Darius I** annexed Gandhara and the Indus region around 518 BCE, making it the twentieth satrapy and, by Herodotus's account, the richest in tribute.
- Achaemenid consequences that are demonstrable include the **Kharoshthi script** derived from Aramaic, the use of inscriptions on rock as a medium of royal proclamation, and possibly the sigloi coinage circulating in the northwest.
- Indian troops served in Achaemenid armies at Marathon and Gaugamela, and Indian goods reached Persia, so the contact was continuous rather than episodic.
- **Alexander** invaded in 327 BCE, defeated **Porus at the Hydaspes in 326 BCE**, and turned back at the Beas when his army refused to advance further, dying at Babylon in 323 BCE.
- Political effect was substantial in the northwest, since Alexander destroyed the small states and republics of Punjab and Sindh, leaving a vacuum that **Chandragupta Maurya** filled within a decade.
- **Indo-Greek consequences** developed later rather than immediately, through the Bactrian kingdoms, and the **Gandhara school of sculpture, Greek astronomical and coin traditions and the Milindapanha** all belong to that later contact.
- Chronology gained a fixed point, since Greek accounts allow Indian dynastic dates to be tied to a datable external framework, and the **Sandrocottus equation** with Chandragupta remains the anchor of ancient Indian chronology.

- **Seleucus Nicator**, Alexander's successor in the east, was defeated by Chandragupta around 305 BCE and ceded the eastern satrapies, which reverses the usual direction of the story and is the outcome that actually mattered.
- Exaggeration to resist: Indian sources do not mention Alexander at all, he held Indian territory for barely two years, and there is no evidence of administrative borrowing from Macedonia.
- For the 2026 question, the defensible position is that Achaemenid influence was real and administrative while Macedonian impact was political and indirect, and that the largest single consequence of both was to clear the way for Mauryan unification.

How the unit is examined

Three questions in four years, on Jainism and Buddhism, on territorial republics and on the invasions. Each rewards the same discipline.

- Where a question asks about the heterodox religions, give the **material explanation** first, then doctrine, then the qualification that neither abolished caste in practice.
- On the gana-sanghas, use the word **oligarchy** rather than republic and say why, since precision on that point separates informed answers from textbook ones.
- For the invasions, separate what is **demonstrable** from what is asserted, and note that Indian sources are silent on Alexander.
- Magadha questions should lead with **geography and resources** rather than with the dynastic sequence, because the dynasties are the mechanism and not the cause.
- Connect the material and the ideological throughout, since the strongest answers in this unit are the ones that show urbanisation, coinage, guilds and the heterodox religions as one process rather than four topics.

Last-mile revision

- Second urbanisation from about the sixth century BCE; iron plus wet rice in Sharma's account; NBPW as the marker; bali, bhaga, shulka.
- Sixteen mahajanapadas from the Anguttara Nikaya; monarchies Magadha, Kosala, Vatsa, Avanti; gana-sanghas Vajji, Shakya, Malla, Koliya.
- Gana-sangha assembly in the santhagara with salaka-gahapaka; better described as oligarchy than republic.
- Punch-marked karshapana; Uttarapatha and Dakshinapatha; shreshthi and Anathapindika; gahapati as a new social category.
- Mahavira 24th tirthankara after Parshvanatha; three jewels, five vows, anekantavada; Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path.
- Magadha: Bimbisara from about 544, Ajatashatru's rathamusala and mahashilakantaka, Shishunaga, Mahapadma Nanda as ekarat; Chandragupta about 321 BCE.
- Darius annexes the Indus about 518 BCE as the twentieth satrapy; Kharoshthi from Aramaic; Alexander 327-325, Hydaspes 326, Sandrocottus equation.

Common errors to avoid

- Calling the gana-sanghas democracies. Participation was limited to the ruling clan; oligarchy is the accurate word.
- Explaining Buddhism and Jainism by doctrine alone. The 2025 question asked for the socio-economic roots and that is where the marks are.
- Saying the heterodox religions abolished caste. Both accepted royal patronage and developed internal hierarchies.
- Overstating Alexander's impact. He held territory for about two years, Indian sources ignore him, and the Gandhara school belongs to later Indo-Greek contact.
- Treating the iron and rice thesis as settled. Iron predates urbanism and the causal link has been questioned.
- Giving the dynastic sequence as the explanation for Magadha's rise. Iron ore, alluvium, river transport and elephants come first.

Mains Practice

“The ideological challenge posed by Jainism and Buddhism was deeply rooted in the socio-economic transformations brought about by the expansion of agrarian settlements in eastern India.” Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

“The Iranian and Macedonian invasions reshaped ancient India through administrative influence, political transformation and cultural interaction.”

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

“The origin of the territorial republics has been traced to the reaction against the pattern of life that evolved in the later Vedic period.”

15 marks · 200 words · 2025