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Introduction to Urbanisation in Ancient India

Ancient India experienced two major waves of urbanisation that significantly shaped its history. The first wave was the Harappan civilisation, which existed before 2000 BCE. These cities were notable for their well-planned structures, organised markets, advanced sanitation systems, and their own writing system.

However, by the early 2nd millennium BCE, these cities collapsed due to unknown reasons, leading people to either leave urban centres or return to rural life. This resulted in a disappearance of urban life in India for about 1000 years.

The second wave of urbanisation began in the 1st millennium BCE, starting in the Ganga plains and later spreading to other regions including the Indus basin.

Exam Question

Q: What were the key features of the Harappan civilisation's urban centres?

A: The Harappan civilisation's urban centres had well-planned structures, organised markets, advanced sanitation systems, and their own writing system.

Janapadas and Mahājanapadas

By the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, north India saw the rise of janapadas. Janapadas were territories where people from the same clan lived together, sharing language and customs. The term "janapada" in Sanskrit means "where people set foot".

Each janapada was led by a rāja (ruler). As trade networks expanded, janapadas began connecting with each other. Around the 8th or 7th century BCE, some janapadas joined to form mahājanapadas, which were larger and more powerful states.

Ancient texts mention 16 mahājanapadas stretching from Gandhāra in the northwest to Aśhmaka in central India. Many mahājanapadas developed in the Ganga plains due to fertile land, availability of iron ore, and well-established trade networks.

Mnemonic to remember Mahājanapadas

V – A – M – K: Vatsa, Avanti, Magadha, Kosala

Exam Question

Q: What is the meaning of the term "janapada" and how did mahājanapadas form?

A: "Janapada" means "where people set foot" and refers to territories inhabited by people of the same clan. Mahājanapadas formed when some janapadas joined together to create larger and more powerful states.

Governance Systems in Janapadas and Mahājanapadas

Janapadas had assemblies called **sabhā** or **samiti**, where the rājās were expected to listen to advice. Some texts suggest assemblies could remove rājās who were ineffective.

Mahājanapadas expanded on these governance principles. Most were monarchies with hereditary rulers. The rājās held ultimate power but were supported by ministers and assemblies. Their duties included collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, building fortifications, and keeping armies.

Exam Question

Q: What roles did the assemblies play in the governance of janapadas?

A: Assemblies advised the rājās and could remove rulers who were not performing well, ensuring accountability in governance.

Innovations During the Second Urbanisation

This period saw the emergence of new schools of thought including late Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. Scholars, monks, and nuns travelled across India spreading teachings. Pilgrimages helped disseminate literature and ideas. The first coins were also introduced during this time.

Indian art began to develop and later flourished during empire periods.

Technology played a significant role in urbanisation. Iron technology was mastered by the early 2nd millennium BCE, leading to improved agriculture and sharper, lighter weapons compared to earlier copper and bronze tools.

Exam Question

Q: How did iron technology impact ancient Indian society during the Second Urbanisation?

A: Iron technology improved agriculture by enabling farming on a larger scale and provided sharper, lighter weapons, enhancing military capabilities.

The Varṇa–Jāti System

Indian society developed the varṇa–jāti system. **Jāti** referred to communities tied to specific professions, with skills passed down through generations. Jātis were divided into sub-jātis with their own customs.

Varna categories from Vedic texts included four groups:

- **Brahmins:** Priests and scholars who preserved knowledge and performed religious rituals.
- **Kshatriyas:** Rulers and warriors who protected society.
- **Vaishyas:** Farmers, traders, and business people who increased wealth.
- **Shudras:** Artisans, craftspeople, and laborers.

The English word "caste" may refer to varṇa, jāti, or the entire system.

Mnemonic to remember Varnas

B-K-V-S: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras

Exam Question

Q: What is the difference between varna and jāti in ancient Indian society?

A: Varna refers to the four broad social categories described in Vedic texts, while jāti refers to specific communities linked to particular professions with distinct customs.

Developments Elsewhere in India

Communication routes opened for trade, pilgrimages, and military campaigns:

- **Uttarapatha:** Connected northwest to eastern India via the Ganga plains.
- **Dakshinapatha:** Ran from Kauśhāmbī through the Vindhya Range to south India.
- **Lateral roads:** Connected western and eastern coastal ports.

Coastal ports became busy trade centres. In the east, cities like Śhīshupalgarh emerged as the capital of Kalinga.

Exam Question

Q: Name the major ancient communication routes in India and their significance.

A: Uttarapatha connected northwest to eastern India, Dakshinapatha connected central to south India, and lateral roads linked coastal ports, facilitating trade, pilgrimages, and military movements.

Timeline of Ancient Indian Urban and Political Development

Time Period / Year	Event / Change	Importance
Before 2000 BCE	Harappan Civilisation	First major urban civilisation with planned cities and advanced systems.
Early 2nd millennium BCE	Collapse of Harappan cities	Decline of urban life, return to rural living.
1st millennium BCE	Second Urbanisation	Rise of new cities in Ganga plains and Indus basin.
End of 2nd millennium BCE	Rise of Janapadas	Formation of clan-based territories with rulers and assemblies.
8th–7th century BCE	Formation of Mahājanapadas	Larger and more powerful states formed from janapadas.

Exam Question

Q: Outline the chronological development from the Harappan Civilisation to the Mahājanapadas.

A: The Harappan Civilisation existed before 2000 BCE and collapsed by early 2nd millennium BCE. After a period of rural living, the Second Urbanisation began in the 1st millennium BCE, leading to the rise of janapadas by the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. Around the 8th or 7th century BCE, some janapadas joined to form mahājanapadas.

Solved Examples

1. **Example:** Explain why many mahājanapadas developed in the Ganga plains.

Solution: The Ganga plains had fertile land suitable for agriculture, easy availability of iron ore for tools and weapons, and well-established trade networks, all of which supported the growth of mahājanapadas.

2. **Example:** Describe the role of assemblies in janapada governance.

Solution: Assemblies such as sabhā and samiti advised the rājās and could hold them accountable, including removing ineffective rulers, thus playing a key role in governance.

Practice Set

Easy

1. What does the term "janapada" mean?
2. Name two features of Harappan cities.

Moderate

1. List the four varnas and their main roles.
2. What were the main duties of a rāja in a mahājanapada?

Challenging

1. Explain the significance of iron technology during the Second Urbanisation.
2. Describe the communication routes in ancient India and their importance.

Answer Key

1. Janapada means "where people set foot" and refers to a territory inhabited by a clan.
2. Well-planned structures and advanced sanitation systems.
3. Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders/farmers), Shudras (laborers/artisans).
4. Collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, building fortifications, and keeping armies.
5. Iron technology improved agriculture and weaponry, enabling larger scale farming and better military tools.
6. Uttarapatha, Dakshinapatha, and lateral roads facilitated trade, pilgrimages, and military campaigns.

Quick Reference

- **Harappan Civilisation:** Early urban civilisation with planned cities.
- **Janapadas:** Clan-based territories with rulers and assemblies.
- **Mahājanapadas:** Larger states formed from janapadas.
- **Varna System:** Four social categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras.
- **Iron Technology:** Advanced tools and weapons aiding agriculture and warfare.
- **Communication Routes:** Uttarapatha, Dakshinapatha, lateral roads connecting regions.

Glossary

- **Moat:** A deep, wide ditch surrounding a fort or city, filled with water for protection.
- **Urbanisation:** The growth and development of cities and towns.
- **Clan:** A large family group related by blood sharing common ancestors.
- **Chronological:** Arranged in the order of time from earliest to latest.
- **Janapada:** Territory inhabited by a clan with a ruler and assembly.
- **Mahājanapada:** A large and powerful state formed by the union of janapadas.
- **Varna:** The four broad social classes in ancient Indian society.

- **Jāti:** A community linked to a specific profession with inherited skills.
- **Sabhā/Samiti:** Assemblies advising rulers in governance.

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