

THE RISE OF MAGADHA UNDER BIMBISARA

(with special reference to his marital alliances)

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ABSTRACT

Among the sixteen mahajanpadas and ten republics of the sixth century B.C, the kingdom of Magadha under the leadership of Bimbisara gave an important place to the establishment of matrimonial alliances in their foreign policy. Due to this Magadha emerged as the most powerful kingdom of northern India. Marital relations had an important role in shaping the politics of sixth century B.C.

Key Words: Dominion, Aggrandizement, Diplomatic, Expansionist, Strategic, Enmity.

Among the sodasa mahajanpadas of pre Buddhist age, the kingdom of Magadha emerged as the most powerful one.¹ The kingdom of Magadha roughly corresponds to Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar.² The ascendancy of Magadhan kingdom commenced with the rise of Haryanka dynasty there. Bimbisara was the first important ruler of Haryanka dynasty.³ He sat on the throne of Magadha in c.545-44 B.C.⁴ Bimbisara has a clear perception of the political situation of his times. He by his diplomatic policies and military achievements raised the small Magadhan principality to a big empire.

Bimbisara maintained friendly relations with his contemporaries. When king Pradyota of Avanti was suffering from jaundice, Bimbisara had sent his royal physician Jivaka to cure him.⁵ The Gandhara king Pukkusati was also his friend and had sent an envoy to the Magadhan court.⁶ H.C Raychaudhuri has remarked on his achievement that "by war and policy Bimbisara added Anga and a part of Kasi to the Magadhan dominions and launched Magadha to that career of conquest and

aggrandizement which only ended when Ashoka sheathed his sword after the conquest of kalinga".⁷

The Mahavagga informs that Bimbisara's dominion embraced 80,000 townships⁸ and its capital was Rajagraha or Girivraja.⁹ In the policies of Bimbisara matrimonial alliances occupied a prominent place. The Mahavagga informs that he had about five hundred queens.¹⁰ Probably the number mentioned in Mahavagga may not be exactly true but he had several queens, some of them are known from literary sources also. The Jatakas inform of his queen Kosaladevi, the daughter of Mahakoshala and sister of king Prasenjit of Koshala.¹¹ According to Jain sources, Bimbisara's second queen was Chellana, the daughter of Lichchhavi chief Chetaka.¹² His third wife was Vaidehi Vasavi¹³ and his fourth wife was Khema, the daughter of King of Madradesa.¹⁴

The Jain text Antagadadasao¹⁵ mentions his following 23 queens- Nanda, Nanda Mai, Nanduttara, Nandi Seniya, Maruya, Sumaruya, Mahamaru, Marudeva, Bhadda, Subhadda, Sujaya,

Sumana, Muyadonna, Kali, Sukali, Mahakali, Kanha, Mahakanha, Sukanha, Vira-Kanha, Ram-Kanha, Piyusenakanha and Mahasena-Kanha.... The other literary texts also inform about the following wives of Bimbisara—Apatgandha, Vasumitra, Abhayamati, Nanda, Dhavasri, Dharini, Utumbarika.¹⁶ The above information from literary sources prove that Bimbisara had several queens. Some of them played a very important role in enhancing his political position as they were made with powerful contemporary kingdoms. According to H.C Raychaudhuri “He pursued a policy of dynastic marriages like Hapsburgs and Bourbons of the Europe and contracted matrimonial alliances with the ruling families of Madra, Kosala and Vaisali”.¹⁷

According to Buddhist Jatakas, Bimbisara by marrying Kosaladevi entered into matrimonial relations with the kosalans, which greatly augmented the financial resources of Magadhan kingdom, as Kosaladevi brought with her a village of Kashi, producing revenue of one lakh gold coins for her bath and perfume money.¹⁸ This marital alliance also provided security to the Magadhan kingdom, as Kosala proved to be a buffer state between Magadha and Vatsa. Magadha could have easily fallen prey to the expansionist policy of its neighbouring kingdoms, so Bimbisara would have thought it politic to enter into marital relations with the kosalans. The geographical position of Kosala was such that it could be quite beneficial in the form of a friend, and a destroyer in the form of an enemy. The two powerful neighbours ruled for a long period without drawing swords against each other. Bimbisara’s marital relations with the Kosalans indicate that he was politically shrewd and a far sighted king.

Bimbisara had also established marital relations with the republican state of Lichchhavis of Vaishali by marrying Chellna, the daughter of Lichchhavi chief Chetaka.¹⁹ The Lichchhavis were powerful and belonged to the strong Vajjian confederation.²⁰ The traditional sources inform that the Lichchhavis attacked the Magadhan kingdom.²¹ According to D.R.Bhandarkar, in the above conflict, the Lichchhavis were defeated by Bimbisara and

peace was ratified between them and this matrimonial alliance was contracted in which Bimbisara had an upper hand.²² This marital relation proved very fruitful for Bimbisara as it not only safeguarded the northern boundary of the Magadhan Kingdom, but also enabled him to secure a powerful ally in his neighbourhood. This marital alliance was economically and militarily motivated, as the Vinayapitaka informs that the Lichchhavis attacked the Magadhan capital at night²³ but after this alliance these attacks ended. This marriage also contributed to the economic prosperity of Magadha, as Vaishali the capital of the Lichchhavis was a commercial city because river Ganges formed its southern boundary, which was used as a trade route in commercial transportations. Due to this advantage, Vaisali, to a great extent, controlled the marine and commercial activities of eastern India.²⁴ After having relations with Lichchhavis, Bimbisara would have taken advantage of this trade route, which would have added to the economic prosperity of his empire.

Bimbisara’s queen Chellana had a deep influence on his personality and religion. Chellana was a staunch follower of Mahavira as her father’s sister was Mahavira’s mother. So Mahavira Swami was his cousin brother in relation.²⁵ Under her influence, Bimbisara drew closer to Mahavira Swami. The Uttaradhyana Sutra informs that the ‘lion of the kings’ visited the other ‘lion of homeless ascetics’, Mahavira along with his wives, servants and relations and became a staunch believer in the law’.²⁶ Hemachandra had also mentioned that “when the country was under the blight of cold, the king accompanied by his wife Devi Chellana, went to worship Mahavira”.²⁷ Thus Bimbisara’s Jain leanings may have been due to his wife Chellana. This matrimony would have also contributed in enhancing the power and prestige of Magadha as this was also a politically motivated alliance.

Bimbisara had a queen named Khema, the princess of Madradesa.²⁸ The kingdom of Madra was situated between Chenab and Vyas rivers. Its capital was Sakala or Siyalkot.²⁹ According to Dhammapaa Attakatha, Khema was famous for her beauty.³⁰ This

marriage would have established friendly relation of Bimbisara with a powerful kingdom of the north-west. Bimbisara also had a queen named Vaidehi Vasavi. It is said that she had served food to Bimbisara and saved his life when he was in the captivity of his son Ajatashatru.³¹

The matrimonies of Bimbisara indicate that he moved quite cautiously and consolidated his position by making friends all around him through his matrimonial alliances. These relations of marriage are also eloquent witnesses to the high estimate held in other countries of the then political importance of Magadha. His diplomatic and matrimonial relations would have helped him considerably in the aggressive policy initiated by him. It appears that Bimbisara's policy of dynastic relations with the royal houses of Kosala, Madra and Vaisali would have greatly helped in his expansionist policy. Bimbisara not only appeared the most formidable militarist of his age, but eventually paved the way for the expansion of kingdom both westward and northward.³² Thus Bimbisara's policy of establishing marital alliances with contemporary royal families would have not only increased the power, prestige and area of influence of the newly established Haryanka dynasty but also helped him in establishing an extensive empire. However some historians have suggested that these marital relations had some negative impact also because princess from different royal families had entered into the royal family of Magadha, which would have created a feeling of enmity in the royal palace, probably due to the royal interests of their maternal families. This negative impact could be witnessed in the reign of Ajatshatru, the son of Bimbisara as it led to several wars. Thus, it can be said that Bimbisara's marriages were deliberately planned to gain political and strategic advances.

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