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State Structure and the Varna System in the Age of the Buddha

Second Urbanization

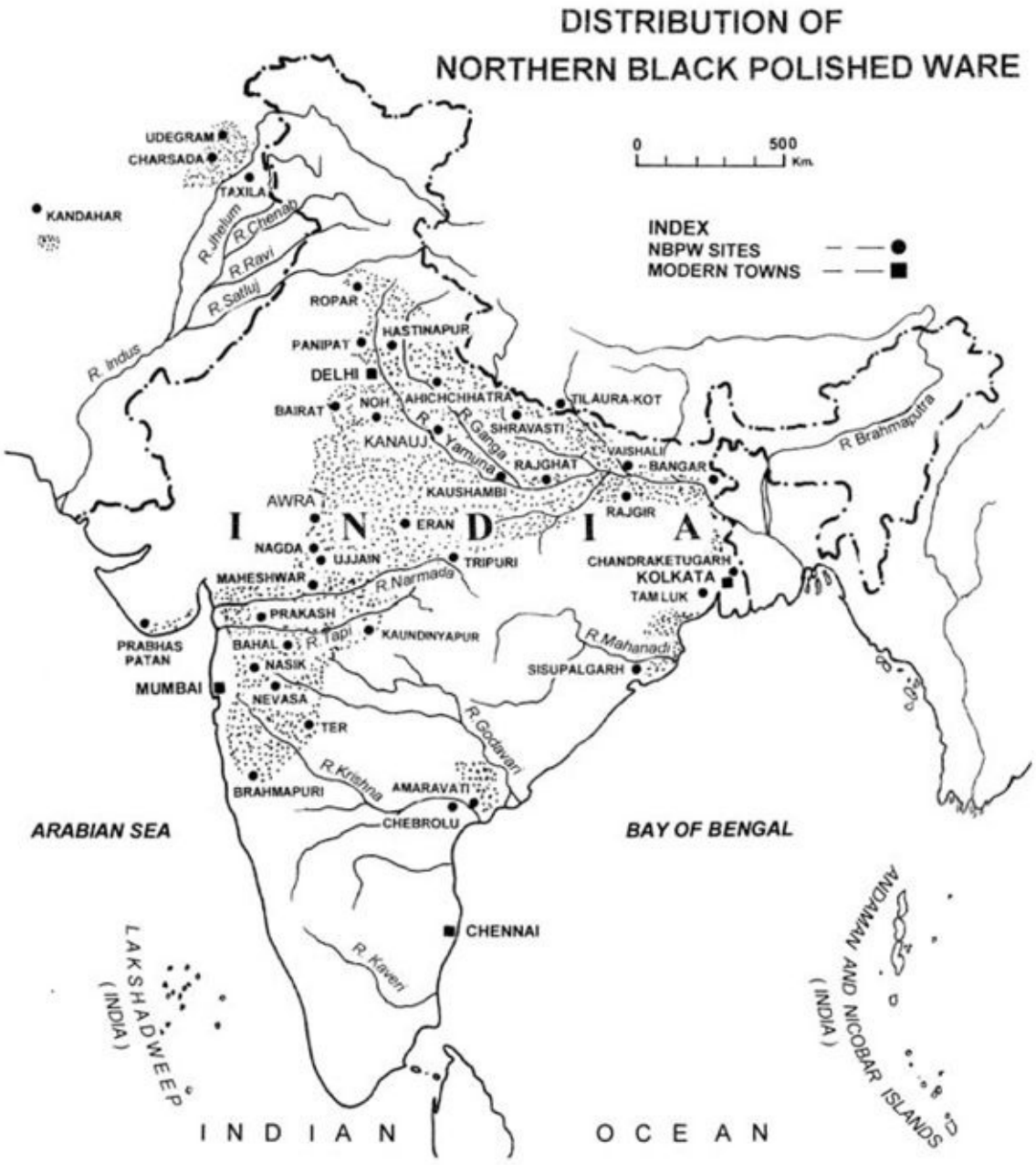
A picture of material life in north India, especially in eastern UP and Bihar, can be drawn on the basis of the Pali texts and the Sanskrit Sutra literature in combination with archaeological material. Archaeologically, the fifth century BC marks the beginning of the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) phase in the Gangetic plains, and this was a very glossy, shining type of pottery. This pottery was made of very fine material and apparently served as tableware for the rich. In association with this pottery are found iron implements, especially those meant for crafts and agriculture. This phase also saw the beginning of metal money. The use of burnt bricks and ring wells began in the middle of the NBPW phase, that is, in the third century BC.

Studies of the doab sites show that Chalcolithic settlements started in the black-and-red ware phase in pre-PGW times, and increased substantially in the PGW phase. A survey of Kanpur district shows that the settled area in the PGW phase was thrice the area in the black-and-red ware phase.

Also, this settled area expanded over two and a half times during the NBPW phase. As settlements expanded, the population kept increasing. Thus, the NBPW phase, starting around 500 BC, saw a considerable increase in both settlements and population.

The NBPW phase marked the beginning of the second urbanization in India. The Harappan towns disappeared in 1900 BC. Following that, for about 1500 years, no towns were established in India. However, from about 1200 BC we

notice settlements in the doab and the neighbouring areas. We find two types of settlements in the lower doab in 1000–600 BC, based on size and location. In the same area and on the same basis, four types of settlements are located some parts. This settlement hierarchy is regarded as the most important indicator of urbanization. Large settlements may enjoy some advantages over the smaller ones, but without crafts, coins, trade, and agricultural surplus even a large settlement cannot grow into a town. Towns arose in the mid-Gangetic basin in the fifth century BC, and thus a second urbanization began in India. Many towns mentioned in the Pali and Sanskrit texts, such as Kaushambi, Shravasti, Shringaverapur, Ayodhya, Kapilavastu, Varanasi, Vaishali, Rajgir, Pataliputra, and Champa have been excavated, and in each case signs of habitation and mud structures relating to the early NBPW phase or to the middle period of it have been found. Wooden palisades have been found in Patna, and these possibly relate to pre-Maurya times. Relating to the seventh–sixth centuries BC, these are the earliest wooden enclosures in the mid-Gangetic plains. The houses were mostly made of mud brick, and wood, which naturally disintegrated in the moist climate of the mid-Gangetic basin. Although seven-storeyed palaces are mentioned in the Pali texts, these have not been discovered anywhere. The structures that have so far been excavated are generally unimpressive, though together with the other material remains they indicate a great increase in population in comparison to the PGW settlements.



MAP 7 Distribution of Northern Black Polished Ware. *Courtesy ASI*

Many towns were seats of government, but whatever be the causes of their origin, they eventually became markets and came to be inhabited by artisans and merchants. The city of Champa near Bhagalpur is called Vaniyagama in a Prakrit text, and means a settlement of merchants. Some places were centres of artisans: Saddalaputta at Vaishali had 500 potters' shops. Both artisans and merchants were organized into guilds under their respective headmen.

We hear of eighteen guilds of artisans but only the guilds of smiths, carpenters, leather workers, and painters are specified. Both artisans and merchants lived in fixed localities in towns. We hear of *vessa*s or merchants' streets in Varanasi, and of the street of ivory workers. Thus, specialization in crafts developed on the strength of the guild system as well as localization. Generally crafts were hereditary, and the son learned his family trade from the father.

The products of crafts were transported by merchants over long distances. We repeatedly hear of 500 cartloads of goods. These contained fine textiles, ivory objects, pots, and the like. All the important cities of the period were situated on river banks and trade routes, and connected with one another. Shravasti was linked with both Kaushambi and Varanasi. The latter was considered to be a great centre of trade in the age of the Buddha. The route from Shravasti passed eastward and southward through Kapilavastu and Kushinara (Kasia) and linked to Vaishali. Traders crossed the Ganges near Patna and travelled to Rajgir, and also via this river to Champa. If we are to believe the Jataka tales, the traders of Koshala and Magadha went via Mathura as far north as Taxila. Similarly, from Mathura they travelled southward and westward to Ujjain and the Gujarat coast.

Trade was facilitated by the use of money. The coin or metal money bearing the stamp of an authority was invented in the seventh century BC in Lydia in Asia Minor. How it was first introduced in India is not clear. The terms *nishka* and *satamana* in the Vedic texts are taken to be names of coins, but they seem to have been prestige objects made of metal. It appears that in Vedic times, exchange was conducted through barter, and the mutual gift system served as a mode of exchange in pre-Buddhist times. Sometimes cattle served the purpose of currency. Coins made of metal appear first in the age of Gautama Buddha. The earliest were made largely of silver, though a few copper coins also existed. They are called punch-marked because pieces of silver and copper were punched

with certain marks, such as a hill, tree, fish, bull, elephant, and crescent. In Maurya and later times cast coins and die-struck coins of different metals were also used. The earliest hoards of coins have been found in eastern UP and Magadha, although some early coins have also been found in Taxila. The Pali texts indicate plentiful use of money and show that coins were used to pay wages and buy goods. The use of money had become so universal that even the price of a dead mouse was estimated in it.

By 300 BC we notice full-fledged urbanization that led to a great increase in population. It is estimated that 270,000 people lived in Pataliputra, 60,000 in Mathura, 48,000 in Vidisha or modern Besnagar and Vaishali, 40,000 in Kaushambi and old Rajgir, and 38,000 in Ujjain. Such sizable populations cannot be suggested for earlier times.

Urbanization strengthened the state, increased trade, and promoted reading and writing. After the end of the Harappan culture, writing probably began a couple of centuries before Ashoka. The earliest records have been destroyed, probably because they were written on wood and similar perishable material. Writing led to the compilation not only of laws and rituals but also facilitated bookkeeping, which was so essential to trade, tax-collection, and the maintenance of a large professional army. The period produced texts dealing with sophisticated measurement (Sulvasutras), which presuppose writing and which may have helped in the demarcation of fields and houses.

Rural Economy

Although rural settlements of the NBPW phase have not been excavated, sherds of this ware have been found at over 400 sites in the plains of Bihar and those of eastern and central UP. However, the NBPW also extended over MP and Maharashtra. We cannot think of the beginning of crafts, commerce, and urbanization in the mid-Gangetic basin without a strong rural base. Princes, priests, artisans, traders, administrators, military personnel, and numerous other functionaries could not live in towns unless taxes, tributes, and tithes were available in sufficient measure to support them. Non-agriculturists living in towns had to be fed by agriculturists living in villages. In return, artisans and traders living in towns made tools, cloth, and the like available to the rural folk. We hear of a village trader depositing 500 ploughs with a town merchant, and these were evidently iron ploughshares. From the NBPW phase in Kaushambi, iron tools consisting of axes, adzes, knives, razors, nails, sickles, etc., have been

discovered. A substantial number of them relate to the layers of about the fifth–fourth centuries BC, and were probably meant for the use of the peasants who bought them with cash or kind.

Numerous villages are mentioned in the Pali texts, and towns seem to have been situated amidst clusters of villages. It seems that the nucleated rural settlement in which all the people settled at one place with their agricultural lands mostly outside the settlement were first established in the mid-Gangetic plains during the age of Gautama Buddha. The Pali texts speak of three types of villages. The first category included the typical village inhabited by various castes and communities, and these villages seem to have been the largest in number and each village headed by a village headman called *bhojaka*. The second included suburban villages that were in the nature of craft villages; for instance, a carpenters' village or chariot-makers' village was situated in the vicinity of Varanasi. Obviously such villages served as markets for the other villages and linked the towns with the countryside. The third category consisted of border villages situated at the outer limits of the countryside which merged with the surrounding forests. People living in these villages were principally fowlers and hunters who largely lived on food gathering.

The village lands were divided into cultivable plots which were allotted to each family. Every family cultivated its plots in conjunction with its members supplemented by agricultural labourers. Fields were fenced and irrigation channels dug collectively by the peasant families under the supervision of the village headman.

The peasants had to pay one-sixth of their produce as tax. Taxes were collected directly by royal agents, and generally no intermediate landlords existed between the peasants, on the one hand, and the state, on the other. Some villages were however granted to brahmanas and big merchants. We also hear of large plots of land worked with the help of slaves and agricultural labourers. Rich peasants were called *gahapati*s (Pali term), who were of almost the same status as a section of the vaishyas.

Rice was the staple cereal produced in eastern UP and Bihar during this period. Various types of paddy and paddy fields are described in the Pali texts. Although rice was used in India in the second and third millennia BC, like iron, it became far more effective in the NBPW phase. The use of the term *shali* for transplantation is found in the Pali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit texts of the period, and it appears that large-scale paddy transplantation began in the age of the Buddha. Until *c*. 500 BC, paddy seeds were sown and grown exclusively in watery areas. Subsequently however the paddy seedlings were removed from their original

fields and planted elsewhere on a good scale. This method revolutionized rice production. Paddy transplantation or wet paddy production added enormously to the yield. In addition, the peasants also produced barley, pulses, millets, cotton, and sugarcane. Agriculture made great strides through the use of the iron ploughshare, and, with the immense fertility of the alluvial soil in the area between Allahabad and Rajmahal, production more than doubled. The surplus grain comprising rice and other cereals formed the basis of the very existence of those not directly engaged in agricultural production.

Technology became central to the progress of the rural and urban economy. Iron played a crucial role in opening the rainfed, forested, hardsoil areas of the mid-Gangetic basin to clearance, cultivation, and settlement. The production of low carbon steel began from about 600 BC. The smiths knew how to harden iron tools, and some tools from Rajghat (Varanasi) show that they were made out of the iron ores obtained from Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj. It thus appears that people became acquainted with the richest iron mines in India which ensured the supply of tools for crafts and agriculture.

The picture of the economy that emerges from a study of the mid-Gangetic material remains and the Pali texts is very different from the rural economy of later Vedic times in western UP, and also differs from the economy of the Chalcolithic communities in Bihar and UP. For the first time an advanced food-producing economy spread over the alluvial soil of the mid-Gangetic plains and led to the beginning of an urban economy in this area. It was an economy that provided subsistence not only to direct producers but also to many others who were neither farmers nor artisans. This made the collection of taxes and the maintenance of armies possible on a long term basis, and created conditions in which large territorial states could be formed and sustained.

Administrative System

Although we hear of many states in this period, only Koshala and Magadha emerged as powerful. Both of them became mature states ruled by the hereditary monarchs belonging to the kshatriya varna. The Jatakas or tales relating to the previous births of the Buddha tell us that oppressive kings and their chief priests were expelled by the people and new kings installed. However, instances of expulsion were as rare as those of election. The king enjoyed the highest official status and special protection of his person and property. He yielded ground only to great religious leaders of the stature of the Buddha. The king was primarily a

warlord who led his kingdom from victory to victory. This is well illustrated by the careers of Bimbisara and Ajatashatru.

The kings ruled with the aid of officials, both high and low. Higher officials were called *mahamatra*s, and performed a variety of functions such as those of minister (*mantrin*), commander (*senanayaka)*, judge, chief accountant, and head of the royal harem. Probably a class of officers *ayukta*s also performed similar functions in some states.

Ministers played an important part in administration. Varsakara of Magadha and Dirghacharayana of Koshala proved to be effective and influential ministers. The first succeeded in sowing seeds of dissension in the ranks of the Lichchhavis of Vaishali, enabling Ajatashatru to conquer the republic. The second assisted the king of Koshala. It seems that high officers and ministers were largely recruited from the brahmana priestly class. They do not in general seem to have belonged to the clan of the king. This substantially undermined the kin-based polity of Vedic times.

In both Koshala and Magadha, despite the use of the punch-marked coins made of silver, some influential brahmanas and *setthi*s were paid by the grant of the revenue of a cluster of villages. In doing so, the king did not have to obtain the consent of the clan, as was the case in later Vedic times, but the beneficiaries were granted only the revenue and not any administrative authority.

The rural administration was in the hands of the village headmen. Initially the headmen functioned as leaders of the tribal regiments, and were therefore called *gramini* which means the leader of the *grama* or a tribal military unit. As life became sedentary and plough cultivation well-established, tribal contingents settled down to agriculture. The *gramini* was therefore transformed into a village headman in pre-Maurya times. The village headmen were known by a variety of titles such as *gramabhojaka*, *gramini* or *gramika.* The title *gramini* prevails in Sri Lanka to this day. Eighty-six thousand *gramika*s are said to have been summoned by Bimbisara. The number may be conventional, but it shows that the village headmen enjoyed considerable importance and had direct links with the kings. The village headmen assessed and collected taxes from the villagers and also maintained law and order in their locality. Sometimes oppressive headmen were taken to task by the villagers.

Army and Taxation

The real increase in state power is indicated by the formation of a large

professional army. At the time of Alexander's invasion, the Nanda ruler of Magadha maintained 20,000 cavalrymen, 200,000 infantry, 2000 four-horse chariots, and about 6000 elephants. The horse-chariots were losing their importance not only in north-east India but also in the north-west, where they had been introduced by the Vedic people. Very few elephants were maintained by the rulers of the states in north-west India, though some of them maintained as many horses as did the Magadhan king. The possession of numerous elephants gave an edge to the Magadhan princes.

The large, long-service army had to be fed by the state exchequer. We are told that the Nandas possessed enormous wealth which must have enabled them to maintain the army, but we have no idea of the special measures they adopted to raise taxes, though the fiscal system was well-established. Warriors and priests, that is, the kshatriyas and the brahmanas, were exempted from payment of taxes, and the burden fell on the peasants who were mainly vaishyas or *grihapati*s. *Bali*, a voluntary payment made by the tribesmen to their chiefs in Vedic times, became a compulsory payment to be made by the peasants in the age of the Buddha, and officers called *balisadhaka*s were appointed to collect it. It appears that one-sixth of the produce was collected as tax by the king from the peasant. Taxes were assessed and collected by the royal agents with the help of village headmen. The advent of writing may have helped in the assessment and collection of taxes. The discovery of many hoards of punch-marked coins suggests that payment was made in both cash and kind. In north-eastern India, payment was made in paddy. In addition to these taxes, the peasants were subjected to forced labour for royal work. The Jatakas state that sometimes peasants left the country of the king in order to escape the oppressive burden of taxes.

Artisans and traders too had to pay taxes. Artisans were made to work for a day in a month for the king, and the traders had to pay customs on the sale of their commodities. The tolls were collected by officers known as *shaulkika* or *shulkadhyaksha*.

The territorial kings discarded the *sabha* and *samiti*. Popular tribal assemblies had virtually disappeared in post-Vedic times. They dwindled and disappeared as tribes disintegrated into varnas and lost their identity. Their place was taken by varna and caste groups, and therefore caste laws and customs were given due weight by the writers of the law-books. However, these regulations were largely confined to social matters. Popular assemblies were able to succeed only in small kingdoms where members of the tribe could easily be summoned, as may have been the case in the Vedic period. With the emergence of the large states of

Koshala and Magadha, it was not possible to hold large assemblies attended by people belonging to the different social classes and different parts of the empire, and the very difficulty of communications made regular meetings impossible. Also, being tribal, the old assembly was unable to find a place for the many non-Vedic tribes which lived in the new kingdoms. The changed circumstances, therefore, were not congenial for the continuance of the old assemblies. They were replaced by a small body called *parishad* consisting exclusively of the brahmanas. Even during this period, assemblies existed, but this was not the case in the monarchies. They flourished in the smaller republican states of the Shakyas, Lichchhavis, and the like.

The Republican Experiment

The republican system of government existed either in the Indus basin or in the foothills of the Himalayas in eastern UP and Bihar. The republics in the Indus basin may have been the remnants of the Vedic tribes, although some monarchies may have been followed by republics. In some instances in UP and Bihar, people were possibly inspired by the old ideals of tribal equality which did not give much prominence to the single raja.

Both Panini and the Pali text, speak of the non-monarchical states. According to Panini, the janapada or the territorial state was generally headed by ekaraja or one king. He specifies nineteen one-king janapadas, but he also speaks of the samgha or multi-ruler janapadas which were republics.

In the republics, real power lay in the hands of tribal oligarchies. In the republics of Shakyas and Lichchhavis, the ruling class belonged to the same clan and the same varna. Although in the case of the Lichchhavis of Vaishali, 7707 rajas sat in the assembly held in the motehall, the brahmanas were not mentioned in this context. In post-Maurya times in the republics of the Malavas and the Kshudrakas, the kshatriyas and the brahmanas were given citizenship, but slaves and hired labourers were excluded from it. In a state situated on the Beas river in the Punjab, membership was restricted to those who could supply the state with at least one elephant, and it was characteristic of the oligarchy of the Indus basin.

The administrative machinery of the Shakyas and Lichchhavis was simple. It consisted of *raja, uparaja* (vice-king), *senapati* (commander), and bhandagarika (treasurer). We hear of as many as seven courts in hierarchical order trying the same case in succession in the Lichchhavi republic, but this seems to be too good to be true!

In any event, certain states in the age of the Buddha were not ruled by hereditary kings but by persons who were responsible to the assemblies. Thus, although the people living in the old republics may not have shared political power equally, the republican tradition in India is as old as the age of the Buddha.

The republics differed from the monarchies in several ways. In the monarchies the king claimed to be the sole recipient of revenue from the peasant, but in the republics, this claim was advanced by every tribal oligarch who was known as raja. Each one of the 7707 Lichchhavi rajas maintained his own storehouse and apparatus of administration. Again, every monarchy maintained its regular standing army and did not permit any group or groups of people to carry arms within its boundaries. However, in a tribal oligarchy, each raja was free to maintain his own little army under his *senapati*, enabling each of them to compete with the other. The brahmanas exercised great influence in a monarchy, but they had no place in the early republics, nor did they recognize these states in their law-books. Finally, the principal difference between a monarchy and a republic was the same as that between one-man rule and many-men rule. The republic functioned under the leadership of oligarchic assemblies but the monarchy under the leadership of an individual.

The republican tradition became feeble from the Maurya period. Even in pre-Maurya times, monarchies were far stronger and more common. Naturally, ancient thinkers looked upon kingship as the commonest and most important form of government. To them, the state, government, and kingship meant the same thing. As the state was well established in the age of the Buddha, thinkers began to speculate about its possible origins. The *Digha Nikaya*, one of the oldest Buddhist texts in Pali, points out that in the earliest stage human beings lived happily. Gradually they began to own private property and set up house with their wives, and this led to quarrels over property and women. In order to put an end to such quarrels, they elected a chief who would maintain law and order and protect the people. In return for protection, the people promised to give the chief a part of the paddy. The chief came to be called king, and that is how kingship or the state originated.

Social Orders and Legislation

The Indian legal and judicial system originated in this period. Formerly people were governed by the tribal law, which did not recognize any class distinction.

However, by now the tribal community had been clearly divided into four orders: brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras. The Dharmasutras therefore set out the duties of each of the four varnas, and the civil and criminal law came to be based on the varna division. The higher the varna, the purer it was, and the higher the level of moral conduct expected of the upper varna by civil and criminal law. All forms of disabilities were imposed on the shudras. They were deprived of religious and legal rights and relegated to the lowest position in society; the *upanayana* or sacred thread could not be conferred on them. Crimes committed by them against the brahmanas and others were severely punished, but those committed against the shudras were lightly treated. The lawgivers spread the fiction that the shudras were born from the feet of the creator. Therefore, members of the higher varnas, especially the brahmanas, shunned the company of the shudra, avoided the food touched by him, and refused to enter into marriage relations with him. A shudra could not be appointed to high posts, and more importantly he was specifically asked to serve the twice-born as slave, artisan, and agricultural labourer.

Jainism and Buddhism themselves did not materially change the shudra's position. Although he could be admitted to the new religious orders, his general position continued to be low. It is said that Gautama Buddha visited the assemblies of the brahmanas, kshatriyas, and *gahapati*s or householders, but assemblies of the shudras are not mentioned in this context. The Pali texts mention ten despicable crafts and castes including the chandalas. They are called *hina* which means poor, inferior, and despicable. In contrast the kshatriyas and brahmanas are called the *uttama* or best castes.

The civil and criminal law set out in the Dharmashastras was administered by royal agents, who inflicted rough and ready punishments such as scourging, beheading, and tearing out of the tongue. In many instances, punishments for criminal offences were governed by the idea of revenge, that is, a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye.

Although the brahmanical law-books took into account the social status of the different varnas in framing their laws, they did not ignore the customs of the non-Vedic tribal groups which were gradually absorbed into the brahmanical social order. Some of these indigenous tribals were given fictitious social origins and allowed to be governed by their own customs.

Conclusion

Gautama Buddha stayed in several mid-Gangetic cities during the rainy seasons. Archaeologically these cities are not dateable to earlier than the fifth century BC. Therefore, the age of the Buddha roughly covers the fifth century BC. This period is important because ancient Indian polity, economy, and society really took shape in its course. Agriculture based on the use of iron tools and paddy transplantation gave rise to an advanced food-producing economy, particularly in eastern UP and Bihar. This created conditions for the rise of towns, based on trade, industry, and the use of metal money. Also, higher levels of cereal production made it possible to collect taxes from the peasants. Therefore, on the basis of regular taxes and tributes, large states could be founded. In order to continue this polity, the varna order was devised, and the functions of each varna were clearly demarcated. According to the law-books, rulers and fighters were called kshatriyas, priests and teachers were called brahmanas, peasants and taxpayers were called vaishyas, and those who served all the higher orders as labourers were called shudras. The Buddhists too recognized the varna system though they did not base it on birth. They, however, gave the kshatriya the highest place in the system.

Chronology

(BC)	
1900	Harappan towns disappeared.
1200 onwards	Settlements in the doab.
1000–600	Hierarchy of settlement in the lower doab, based on size and location.
7–6 C	Earliest wooden enclosures in Patna.
5 C	First towns in the middle Gangetic basin, first coins.