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States and Cities of the Indo-Gangetic Plain

C. 600-300 BC

States and Cities

The sixth century BC witnessed a transition to a new historical scene in north India with the establishment of kingdoms, oligarchies and chiefdoms, and the emergence of towns. Attention now shifted from the north-west and Punjab to the Ganges Plain, although the former area continued its activity. Changes in polity had begun somewhat earlier, but where they were accompanied by urbanization they were to become foundational to the flow of history in the Indian subcontinent. The preceding period had been one of accommodation or confrontation between polities based on clan organization and others experiencing the beginnings of kingship. Permanent settlement in a particular area gave a geographical identity to a clan, or a confederacy of clans, and subsequently this identity was given concrete shape by its claiming possession of the territory, then naming it after the ruling clan. Maintaining this possession required political organization, either as a *gana-sangha,* chiefdom, or as a kingdom. Polities of the earlier period, deriving their identity from the lineage of the ruling family, were gradually giving way to identification with territory and new forms of political authority, although traces of the continuity of descent from a particular ancestry can be found in the names given to the territories. The change to kingdoms was a more pronounced departure in the formation of states.

The emergence of the *gana-sangha* might be better seen as a form of a proto-state. It was unlike a kingdom, since power was diffused, the stratification of its society was limited, and the ramifications of administration and coercive authority were not extensive. The persistence of the *gana-sanghas* in Indian history was quite remarkable, especially in the northern and western regions. Despite being conquered periodically, their resilience was demonstrated by their reappearance and continued presence until the mid-first millennium AD.

A state has been described as a sovereign political entity and its rise assumes a complex network of conditions. These would include a density of population with a concentrated drawing on resources, agricultural or other; control over a defined, recognized territory; an urban centre as the location of authority, which could also be the location for craft activities that were produced for both local consumption and commercial exchange; diverse communities coming within a network of stratification and accepting unequal statuses; a political authority managing the incoming revenue from taxes and their redistribution through at least a minimal administration; the assertion of authority through a monopoly of the agencies of coercion, both of armed force and the imposition of regulations and obligations; the awareness of diplomacy; and the sovereignty of the state being represented in the king as the focus of authority. The emergence of a state system frequently coincides with unequal

power relations and access to resources and some social disparity. Such changes would also have sought support from various ideological justifications.

Reference is made to the *mahajanapadas,* or the great *janapadas,* larger and more powerful than the earlier multiple *janapadas,* and some of these conformed to the definition of the state. Sixteen of them are listed in Buddhist texts as those of Anga, Magadha, the Vrijji confederacy and the Mallas in the middle Ganges Valley; Kashi, Kosala and Vatsa to its west; Kuril, Panchala, Matsya and Shurasena further west; Kamboja and Gandhara in the north-west; Avanti and Chedi in western and central India; and Assaka in the Deccan. This was the geography known to the early Buddhist Pali Canon. In Vedic sources Magadha and Anga are described as impure lands, but Magadha was to dominate the politics of the Ganges Plain. Assaka's importance is related to the southern route to the peninsula, the *dakshinapatha.* The Vrijjis were a confederacy of eight clans, said to have 7,707 rajas; the Mallas were said to have 500 rajas; and the Chedis even more, these being *gana-sanghas.* The *mahajanapadas* listed in Jaina sources take in a wider geographical area, the list probably having been compiled later. This shift parallels the boundaries of the *aryavarta* – the land of the *arya* – which move eastwards in Jaina and Buddhist sources, since the epicentre of these religions was more easterly than the heartland of Vedic culture. Of the clans mentioned in the *Mahabharata,* many were closer to the *gana-sangha* system than to kingdoms, for instance Vrishnis, the clan to which Krishna Vasudeva belonged. The lynchpin of the *janapada* had been the ruling clan, after which it was named, and this in turn ensured some linguistic and cultural commonality. But the *mahajanapada* was also incorporating varied cultures.

The Second Urbanization: the Ganges Plain

The emergence of states and proto-states was a process frequently locked into urbanization. If various degrees of state formation are evident in the polities, degrees of urbanization are similarly reflected in different kinds of towns as they grew out of earlier settlements. The genesis of towns was not uniform and this gave them diverse features. Some grew out of political and administrative centres and were the hub of this power, such as Hastinapura. Somewhat later references mention the capitals of kingdoms, such as Rajagriha in Magadha, Shravasti in Kosala, Kaushambi in Vatsa, Champa in Anga and Ahicchatra in Panchala. Others grew out of markets, each catering to a variety of villages usually located where there was an agricultural surplus that could regularly enter an exchange nexus. Such exchanges were, to begin with, of mundane but essential items such as grain or salt. The exchange could be extended to goods from more distant places if the market was on a trade route, as at Ujjain. These were different from the rituals of exchange of expensive items or prestige goods conducted by elite groups on special occasions. Towns also grew from being sacred centres where people gathered, as is thought to have been the case with Vaishali. These various functions could also be combined in one place. Kaushambi became a town fairly early. The raja is said to have shifted the capital from Hastinapura to Kaushambi because of floods at the former location. The new location was more central to controlling river traffic on the Ganges. Later, it hosted one of the earliest Buddhist monasteries. A concentration of people and the scope for a range of occupations and products were obviously conducive to the growth of towns.

Unfortunately, the details of these processes of change can become available only when horizontal excavations of urban sites of the Ganges Plain are carried out, exposing more extensive layers of

occupation in an attempt to answer the more complex questions related to urbanism. Most excavations at such sites have so far been vertical sections that provide a chronology, but other information is limited. The contrast with the excavation of Harappan cities is only too apparent. Thus, although the earliest dated evidence comes from archaeology, it is difficult to discuss the genesis, growth and function of towns from the kind of data available. Bhir Mound, the section of the city of Taxila in the north-west that is dated to this period, has been excavated horizontally, but is a little too distant for use as evidence for the middle Ganges Plain.

Inevitably, information is gleaned from texts, but these are not always contemporary and, in some cases, even though they reflect on the past, some of the data could be of the immediately subsequent period. Evidence of a more definitive kind about chiefdoms and towns comes from the grammar of Panini, generally dated to the fifth century BC and therefore contemporary with urban centres. The Buddhist Pali Canon, primarily the *Tripitaka,* narrates events relating to the Buddha and records his teaching, and these are often set in an urban context which encourages their use as data on urbanization. This Canon was initially an oral tradition, the writing of which began a couple of centuries after the death of the Buddha. It therefore does not coincide with the earliest phase of urbanization, but with the more mature period. Nevertheless, it can suggest the trends that led to the growth of cities.

Two areas with a concentration of population in the Ganges Plain were the chalcolithic societies of the *doab* and of the middle Ganges Plain. States and urban centres emerged in both areas, but there was a difference. The *doab* and the western Ganges Plain was home to the cultures associated with the Painted Grey Ware/PGW (*c.* 1200-400 BC). Further east, the settlements associated with the Black-and-Red Ware/BRW cultures and the subsequent lustrous, luxury ware known as the Northern Black Polished Ware/NBP W (*c.* 700-200 BC), suggest what in comparison might be called a thicker urbanism, especially from the mid-millennium, although this impression could be due to the imprint of Buddhist texts as well.

The population of the *doab,* though small, slowly expanded. From staying close to the banks of rivers, some settlements moved into the interior where they cleared land for cultivation. This may have been an escape from floods or a more venturesome encroachment into forests. The small settlements linked to Ochre Colour Pottery were more frequent in the upper *doab.* The Painted Grey Ware settlements had a wider distribution in the *doab* and larger sites often occur on the edge of *jheels,* or lakes formed from natural depressions or as ox-bow lakes. Further east, wet-rice cultivation provided a high yield, even if it was more labour intensive. Although sedentary cultivation came to dominate the landscape, it did not eliminate hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and shifting cultivators. Closely placed, small settlements of the Painted Grey Ware gave way to appreciably larger settlements and, at longer distances these were associated with sites and levels of the Northern Black Polished Ware which herald incipient urbanism.

Apart from pre-existing neolithic and chacolithic settlements in the Ganges Plain, the migration there of people from the watershed is suggested by the Black Slipped Ware associated with the Painted Grey Ware of the *doab,* being the same as that associated with potteries from the middle Ganges Plain although of a slightly late date. Imitation of some of the technologies of the watershed area may have resulted in the similarity of technique between the Painted Grey Ware and the Northern Black Polished Ware. This does not point to the imposition of a culture from the western plain, but merely to the presence of people and technologies from there mingling with the existing cultures. Hydraulic and climatic change, resulting in some desiccation in the north-west and Punjab, may have encouraged migrations to the *doab,* while further east the attraction would have been the potential of

fertile lands. The archaeology of those settlements that developed into urban centres reflects differences when compared to earlier settlements, in addition to the occurrence of Northern Black Polished Ware which was an urban hallmark. Having travelled through trade to virtually every part of the subcontinent by the end of the first millennium BC, the Northern Black Polished Ware provides instant recognition. References to towns of the *doab,* such as Hastinapura, gave way to Kaushambi and Bhita, carrying a hint of the metropolis. Excavation at sites such as Vaishali, Ujjain, Shravasti, Rajghat and Rajagriha date urban beginnings to the mid-first millennium BC. At Kaushambi, the start is somewhat earlier.

Judging by excavated and textual data, there seems to have been a fairly consistent concept of the layout of urban centres, although the plan was not invariably adhered to. The town was enclosed by a moat or a rampart, and was sometimes fortified. Digging a moat probably threw up enough earth for the beginnings of a rampart. These sometimes began as mud-fillings, as at Rajghat, and graduated to include bricks, as at Kaushambi. Since many of the towns were located on river banks the rampart would have been a protection against flood, as well as providing a minimal defence against predators and raids. As it developed, the urban ambience was different from that of the village and this may also have encouraged a demarcation. Towns were the location of what was collected as revenue and placed in a treasury, which would also have made them vulnerable to attack and necessitated some form of fortification. The houses were better built than previously and, in the later stages, were of mud-brick with some limited use of fired brick. They were equipped with facilities that were new, such as drains, ring wells and soakage pits which were to become archaeological markers of the second urbanization and were different in form from those used in Harappan cities. Houses at Bhir Mound consisted of rooms built round a courtyard, and this was the prototype house-plan for many towns in India. Rooms opening directly on to streets may have been shops. Streets were levelled to allow wheeled traffic.

A large range of items was involved in the early trade. Iron objects ranged from hoes, sickles and knives to hooks, nails, arrowheads, vessels and mirrors. Salt was mined in the Potwar Plateau in the north-west, and may have travelled the long distance to the Ganges Plain. Craftsmen and artisans in the towns produced textiles, beads, pottery, ivory objects, ceramics and glassware, and artefacts of other metals, all of which were items of trade. The occurrence of the occasional weight together with some of these items underlines exchange. The distribution through exchange was not limited to the Ganges Plain. Goods were also taken to the north-west, from where presumably horses were brought back, and texts refer to the production of blankets and woollen goods in this area, intended for trade. Human and animal forms in terracotta were in considerable demand, and terracotta moulds are commonly found. Figurines reappear, particularly those with extraordinarily elaborate coiffures. Terracotta was also used for making the impressively precise rings for the wells and for the large jars, fitted one above the other as soakage pits.

The urban settlements of the north-west, pre-eminently Taxila, emerge from cultures that differ from those of the Ganges Plain. The excavation of Hathial, which was prior to this period, and the excavation of Bhir Mound – the part of the city complex of Taxila which dates to this period – underlines the importance of the site. Gandhara, in the north-west, is mentioned in the Iranian Achaemenid inscriptions as one of the provinces of the empire, so Taxila is likely to have been an important administrative centre. This may have provided the initial impetus towards urbanization, although its importance grew when it became a point of exchange between north India and places to its west. It has been suggested that the trend towards urbanization of what were to become cities in Gandhara, such as Taxila and Pushkalavati, may have been tied into the earlier importance of cities

further west, such as Kandahar in Afghanistan.

Both urbanization and the formation of states are dependent on the realization of a surplus in production and on the mechanisms by which this was made possible. An agricultural surplus was necessary to townspeople who did not produce their own food and it provided a base for economic diversification. Perhaps the crucial factor was the possibility of two crops a year, in some cases even three. Wet-rice cultivation made a noticeable difference given the substantially larger amount that could be harvested as compared to other crops, and this provided the necessary surplus. This made irrigation a precondition. Converting what was described in the Vedic corpus as the marshland of the middle Ganges Plain to arable land would have involved draining some areas through inundation channels. These may have suggested the idea of cutting channels for irrigation. Irrigation through wells and water-lifting devices would then have been supplemented to a far greater degree. The prerequisite to the cultivation of high-yielding crops and the provision of irrigation would have included the availability of labour, together with a system by which labour could be controlled and directed.

But the production of a surplus is not in itself sufficient, since it has to be gathered and distributed in ways that enable a small group in society to effectively control these activities: a control which also had to be acceptable to the larger society. Surplus produce provides a basis for power only when it can be deployed to enhance the authority of those claiming special status. Since it feeds those who do not produce their own food, it also enables specialization in -various professional craft activities. These are no longer geared only to local consumption, but to producing over and above that in order to augment exchange, since exchange also yields revenue. But, again, the augmentation becomes useful only if there are people to organize the availability of raw material and the distribution of the finished product.

It was earlier thought that providing irrigation was the primary precondition to producing a surplus, and therefore control over irrigation was the foundation of power. This argument has now been questioned and, although irrigation is important, it is not the primary or only factor. The current debate focuses on whether iron technology was the crucial variable. Iron objects of a rudimentary kind go back to the end of the second millennium BC. The use of iron, especially in weaponry, was known around 800 BC although the quality of the metal was of a low grade. The more systematic use of better quality iron is later, with a quantitative and qualitative increase of iron artefacts, which included implements of various kinds, vessels, nails, and suchlike, as well as an improvement in weapons.

The smelting of iron may have begun with using a technology parallel to that of copper-smelting, but the marked confidence in using iron by the mid-millennium is striking. Higher temperatures began to be possible, which was also reflected in the firing of the Northern Black Polished Ware. Excavation at Jodhpura in northern Rajasthan has revealed furnaces for smelting and forging ore, and other centres of iron production were Atranjikhera and Khairadih in the western Ganges Plain. Efficiency in handling iron was a new experience, given that the chalcolithic cultures of the Ganges Plain do not suggest the extensive use of metal. Judging by the artefacts at sites in many parts of India from this time, it would seem that various societies were experimenting with new technologies facilitating the use of iron. The frequency of iron slag also points to its widespread use. It has been plausibly argued that there are references in the earlier sections of the *Mahabharata* to the quenching of iron and to molten metal for casting.

The argument that iron technology changed agricultural production draws on a series of links; iron axes facilitated the clearing of forests so that land could be used for cultivation, the iron hoe was an

effective agricultural implement, and the invention of the iron ploughshare was more efficient in a heavy soil as it could plough deeper than a wooden share. However, very few iron axes have appeared in excavations. Textual evidence seems to prefer burning forests as a method of clearing. Iron ploughshares are still rare from excavated sites, but a much quoted example from a Buddhist text refers to tempering such a share. The efficiency of an iron ploughshare in soils other than that of the Ganges Plain has been questioned.

A function of iron technology, often overlooked in the emphasis on axes and ploughshares, is that of the technical changes which the introduction of iron implements would have brought about in various craft activities. There is a striking increase and qualitative improvement in the making of items from bone, glass, ivory, beads of semi-precious stones and shell, and stone objects, as compared to earlier chalcolithic levels. This is suggestive of a confidence in using the new technology and using it more extensively, for example in various constructions in wood, from the making of beams for ceilings to improving the structure of the chariot, cart and possibly even river craft. Interdependent technologies, such as the firing of superior pottery and the making of glass, were probably also tied into experiments to improve iron artefacts.

Although iron may not have been the crucial variable as a single technological input there is little doubt that as part of a package of change its role cannot be minimized. Since control over the surplus was in the hands of the few, that which enhances the surplus becomes a significant factor. The new technology was diffused through the availability of iron and the fact that blacksmiths were itinerant. To establish a monopoly over the technology was therefore not so easy. Blacksmiths were ranked socially as low. Control therefore could be extended to specific products. Objects made of iron, other than functional ones, could have become status symbols. The state asserted its control over the armoury.

Agricultural expansion and the use of iron are in themselves necessary but not sufficient factors in the creation of a surplus to bring about urbanization and state systems. An interesting comparison could be made with the contemporary megalithic societies of the peninsula that had both features but remained at a pre-state and pre-urban level. The collecting and redistributing of the surplus was yet another necessary component to the change, which was not limited to accessing what came to the treasury but also extended to control over those who laboured in creating these products. The evolution towards the state required a new relationship between those who laboured and those who managed their labour.

Textual sources point to early urbanization in two ways. One was the description of some villages specializing in professions such as blacksmithing, pottery, carpentry, cloth-weaving, basket-weaving and so on. These were villages close to the raw materials and linked to routes and markets. The availability of the right type of clay, for instance, would attract potters to a particular area, carpenters would head to where timber was available. Specialized craftsmen tended to congregate because this facilitated access to resources and distribution of the crafted items. Such a concentration could evolve into a town, and towns in turn expanded their production and their markets to become commercial centres. Some, such as Vaishali, Shravasti, Champa, Rajagriha, Kaushambi and Kashi, were of substantial importance to the economy of the Ganges Plain. Others, such as Uj jain, Taxila or the port of Bharukaccha (Bharuch), had a wider geographical and economic reach.

A pointer to urbanization also lies in the hierarchy of settlements. The *grama,* village, was the smallest settlement. Places referred to as *nigama* and *putabhedana* were exchange centres and local markets. River ports, such as Pataligrama, and crossing-points on rivers, such as Shringaverapura,

facilitated exchange. The *nagara* was the town and the *mahanagara* was the substantially larger, well-established, prosperous, politically important city. Kaushambi could well have been a *mahanagara,* since its size has been estimated at 150 hectares. Buddhist sources sometimes refer to *gama, nigama, nagara,* in that order, suggesting a hierarchy of the village, the market and the town.

Different wide-ranging identities among townspeople are characteristic of urban centres. In theory, occupational groups are said to have lived and worked in specified sections of the town. Textual sources refer to two highways intersecting at right angles, forming the axis of the town, with the central point being the seat of authority, such as the palace and court of the king, or the assembly hall in the *gana-sangha.* This would be a more monumental building, although such buildings are associated with the mature phase of urbanization, for example the palace at Kaushambi. The religious institution that carried authority would also be associated with the centre of the city, and at this stage would have been the Buddhist monastery. Although both palace and monastery exist at Kaushambi, the latter is not at the central axis of the city. Bhir Mound, where such a city-plan is absent, indicates that cities need not have conformed to the plan. Some attempts at urban coherence were possible through the network of roads, drainage systems and occupational sectors.

Judging by the evidence available so far, it does seem that there was neither remembrance of the city-plans of Harappan times, nor any attempt to imitate them. The structures of the Harappan citadel seem to have been incorporated into the city centre or scattered in the city. Despite the fact that some cities were built on the banks of rivers, which were liable to be affected by floods, there is no evidence of brick foundations to safeguard the buildings. The urban requirements of the Ganges system and its city-dwellers were clearly different from those of the Indus urban centres. Possibly the mobilization of labour for the extension of agriculture took precedence over urban construction.

Townsmen were not kin-related (except perhaps in the towns inhabited by small oligarchies) and, as the town grew, kinship ties declined despite towns being more densely settled than villages. Urban links were therefore based on other features, such as the interdependence of occupation or mechanisms of administration. However, towns were still small enough to allow face-to-face relationships. Apart from the seat of authority, the other important location was where the exchange of goods took place. Later, the locations of religious institutions were added to these. Indian cities generally did not have a central, single market place. Buying and selling were part of the transactions in the locations where items were produced, which may in part account for the concentration of particular products in certain parts of the city. This system may have developed from production and exchange centres growing into cities. Towns, therefore, included a wide span of occupations that allowed experimentation in technologies. They were inhabited by people of varying social strata, permitting varieties of social interchange or social demarcation, and were frequently the location for diverse religious sects.

Gana-sanghas – Chiefdoms and Oligarchies

The *gana-sanghas* were an alternative polity to the kingdoms and may represent the continuation of an earlier system. The connection between the *gana-sanghas* and the growth of various ideologies and belief systems, particularly Buddhist and Jaina, was due to many of these being rooted in the *gana-sanghas*. Buddhist sources therefore mention the working of this system. Panini's grammar refers to both the chiefdoms and the kingdoms, but, owing to the nature of the text, it does not provide

detailed descriptions. Brahmanical sources disapproved of the *gana-sanghas* because they did not perform the required rituals or observe the rules of *varna,* therefore they tend to be ignored in the Vedic corpus. Disapproval is extended to towns in general, whereas the Buddhist Canon has more empathy with urban centres, and emphasizes the centrality of the town. Nevertheless, the role of the town seems more active in the kingdoms, particularly where the town is the capital.

Whereas the kingdoms were concentrated in the Ganges Plain, the *gana-sanghas* were ranged around the periphery of these kingdoms, in the Himalayan foothills and just south of these, in north-western India, Punjab and Sind, and in central and western India. The *gana-sanghas* tended to occupy the less fertile, hilly areas, which may suggest that their establishment predated the transition to kingdoms, since the wooded low-lying hills would probably have been easier to clear than the marshy jungles of the plain. It is equally plausible, however, that the more independent-minded settlers of the plains, disgruntled with the increasing strength of orthodoxy in territories evolving into kingdoms, moved up towards the hills where they established communities more in keeping with egalitarian traditions, at least among the ruling clans. The rejection of Vedic orthodoxy by the *gana-sanghas* indicates that they may have been maintaining an older or an alternative tradition. There were also systems similar to the *gana-sangha* in western India, of which the Vrishnis as described in the *Mahabharata* would be one. Since the Buddhist texts focus on the Ganges Plain, little is said about those in western India.

The compound term *gana-sangha* or *gana-rajya* has the connotation of *gana,* referring to those who claim to be of equal status, and *sangha,* meaning an assembly, or *rajya,* referring to governance. These were systems where the heads of families belonging to a clan, or clan chiefs in a confederacy of clans, governed the territory of the clan or the confederacy through an assembly, of which they alone were members. The term has been translated in various ways. It was once thought that they were democracies but this is hardly appropriate, given that power was vested in the small ruling families and they alone participated in governance. The larger numbers of people who lived in the territory had no rights and were denied access to resources. The term 'republic' was therefore preferred, since it conceded social stratification but was distinct from monarchy. Another term used is 'oligarchy', which emphasizes the power of the ruling families. More recently, early forms of such systems are seen as chiefdoms, underlining their particular genesis, suggesting that they might be pre-states or proto-states, and, at any rate, different from kingdoms.

The *gana-sanghas* consisted of either a single clan, such as the Shakyas, Koliyas and Mallas, or a confederacy of clans, such as the Vrijjis and the Vrishnis. The confederacy of the Vrijjis, located at Vaishali, was of independent clans of equal status and the identity of each was maintained despite their having confederated. These were *kshatriya* clans, but the existence of *kshatriyas* did not presuppose the observance of a *varna* society. They retained more of the clan tradition than did the kingdoms, for example the concept of governing through an assembly representing the clan, even if the assembly was restricted to the heads of clans or families. Legends relating to their origin generally refer to two curious features: one was that the ruling families were frequently founded by persons of high status who, for a variety of reasons, had left or been exiled from their homeland; the other was that a claim to high status was encapsulated in a myth tracing the founding family to an incestuous union between brother and sister. Tracing origins back to such parentage was thought to prove purity of descent, and was therefore highly complimentary. This parting from Vedic orthodoxy is also apparent from at least one source, attributed to brahman authorship, which describes certain *gana-sangha* clans as degenerate *kshatriyas* and even *shudras,* because they have ceased to honour the brahmans or to observe Vedic ritual. Honouring the brahmans included accepting *varna* stratification.

The *gana-sanghas* had only two strata – the *kshatriya rajakula,* ruling families, and the *dasa-karmakara,* the slaves and labourers. The latter were therefore non-kin labour, which was a departure from earlier clan systems where kinsfolk laboured together. Their non-acceptance of Vedic ritual is also evident in their veneration for sacred enclosures and groves, with other manifestations of popular religious cults.

The corporate aspect of government was held to be the major strength of *gana-sanghas.* The actual procedure involved the meeting of the heads of families, or of clans in the assembly, located in the main city where they lived. The assembly was presided over by the head of the clan. This office was not hereditary and was regarded as that of a chief, rather than a king, although the later gloss on raja tended to treat it as that of a king. The matter for discussion was placed before the assembly and debated, and if a unanimous decision could not be reached it was put to vote. Assisting in the rudimentary administration were those who advised the raja, the treasurer and the commander of the soldiers. Later sources describe an elaborate judicial procedure, the suspected criminal having to face in turn a hierarchy of seven officials.

Social and political power lay with the rajas who sat as representatives in the assembly, and who were ranked as *kshatriyas.* This may account for Buddhist sources often placing the *kshatriyas* first, with the brahmans second in the *varna* hierarchy, since they were more familiar with the *gana-sanghas,* although it could also have been due to Buddhist opposition to Brahmanism. The income of the *gana-sanghas* of the middle Ganges Plain came largely from agriculture, particularly wet-rice cultivation, cattle-rearing no longer being a primary occupation except in parts of the Punjab and the *doab.* However, their cities also attracted traders, which would have been an additional source of wealth. For the chiefdoms of the north-west, however, revenue from trade would have been primary.

Land was owned in common by the clan, but was worked by hired labourers and slaves – the *dasa-karmakara.* This compound phrase makes it difficult to determine the degree to which production was dependent on the *dasas,* slaves, or on the *karntakaras,* hired labour. Most descriptions of slavery suggest domestic slavery, rather than the use of slaves in production. In the two-tier system those who worked the land did so under the control of the ruling clan, so management of labour was comparatively simple provided the cultivators did not resist the control. Thus, when trouble broke out over the diversion of irrigation water between those cultivating the land of the Shakyas and of the Koliyas, the ruling families of the two clans intervened directly. The *dasa-karmakaras* were not represented in the assembly and had virtually no rights.

Judging by descriptions of the *gana-sanghas,* the town functioned rather like a capital and was a familiar part of their life. The landowning clansmen lived in the town and participated in the usual urban activities. We are told of a young man of Vaishali who travelled to Taxila to be trained in medicine, a long and difficult journey, and then returned. The *gana-sanghas* were less opposed to individualistic and independent opinion than the kingdoms, and were more ready to tolerate unorthodox views. It was from the *gana-sanghas* that there came the two teachers of what were to become the most important heterodox sects: Mahavira, associated with advancing Jainism, belonged to the Jnatrika clan which was part of the Vrijji confederacy located at Vaishali, and the Buddha grew up in Kapila vastu, the town of the Shakya clan.

Not having a monarchical system, members of the *gana-sanghas* could also reject brahman political theories. Perhaps the most striking of the non-brahman theories was the Buddhist account of the origin of the state, possibly the earliest theory approaching that of a social contract. There was a time in the remote past when complete harmony prevailed among all created beings, men and women having no desires, as everything was provided for. Gradually a process of decay began, when needs,

wants and desires became manifest. These led to the notion of ownership that resulted in the concept of the family, then led to private property, and these in turn to disputes and struggles that necessitated law and a controlling authority. Thus it was decided that, in order to avoid conflict, one person be elected to rule and maintain justice. He was to be the Great Elect (*Mahasammata*) and was given a fixed share in the produce of the land as a wage. The Buddhist theory attempts to explain the connections between various institutions that were current at the time – the family, private property and caste. Such a theory suited the political systems of the *gana-sanghas* and was different from that prevalent in the kingdoms. In the brahmanical theory of kingship, the king as the protector of the people was appointed by the gods, was the patron of the ritual of sacrifice, and was expected to uphold and maintain *varna* society – the *varnasbrama-dharma.* By contrast, the Buddhist theory attempts a rational explanation of the need for governance.

Kingdoms

In contrast to the *gana-sanghas,* kingdoms registered a centralized government with the king's sovereignty as its basis. The polity in the kingdoms was slowly transmuted from chiefship to kingship. The change carried with it a ritual status that added another dimension to the authority of the king. Power was concentrated in the ruling family. Legitimation became an important component, emphasizing claims to *kshatriya* status often bestowed through brahmanical ritual. Kingdoms point to a state system characterized by new features compared to the earlier period. The king enforced laws that could involve coercion. The latter had to be dovetailed into the customary law of the *jatis* and the region – a concern that was to continue throughout history. Governance extended over the territory of the hinterland surrounding the main town, and sometimes much further.

The ruling family became a dynasty, succession to kingship being hereditary, with a premium on primogeniture. Political power was concentrated in the king. He was advised and assisted by ministers, advisory councils such as the *parishad* and *sabha* – both terms continuing from earlier times but now with an advisory connotation – and an administration manned by officers. The latter assessed and collected the revenue, bringing it to the treasury in the capital from where it was redistributed in the form of salaries and public expenses, such as the maintenance of an army and administration, gift-giving to brahmans and religious functionaries and, of course, a personal income for the ruling family. Public works would include ways of enhancing production, for this would increase the revenue. The provision of irrigation works, for instance, was once thought to be the prerogative of the state, but routine irrigation that provided much of the water for agriculture in many areas remained an activity of the individual cultivator or the village. Where labour was required on a scale not manageable by local cultivators, such as building canals or reservoirs, the state would intervene. The existence of a state also involved political relations of varying kinds with neighbours, some friendly and some hostile, with a tendency to erase existing social relations and replace them with new ones, often more amenable to those in authority.

Clan loyalty weakened in the kingdoms, giving way to caste loyalties and a focus on loyalty to the king. The political expansion of the kingdoms over large areas also emaciated the strength of the popular assemblies, since distances prevented frequent meetings. The *gana-sangha* was based on a smaller geographical area, where it was easier to meet the requirements of a relatively more representative government. In the monarchical system the divinity of the king, with its corollary of the

power of the priests and of Vedic ritual, had further reduced the centrality of the popular assemblies of early Vedic times. The competition between elites in the kingdom, and the earlier rivalry between brahmans and *kshatriyas,* was gradually having to contend with what was to become a new phenomenon in the towns – the rise of wealthy traders. Insistence on the *varna* hierarchy was an attempt at retaining authority.

A number of kingdoms are mentioned in the literature of the period. Among these, Kashi (the region of Banaras) was initially important. Kosala (adjoining Kashi to the north-east), and later Magadha (in south Bihar), were rivals for the control of the Ganges Plain, a control that had both strategic and economic advantages, since a large part of the early trade in the region was carried by river and was centred on river ports. Finally, there remained only four rival states: the three kingdoms of Kashi, Kosala and Magadha, and the oligarchy of the Vrijjis.

Kings were supposed to be of the *kshatriya* caste, although this preference remained theoretical since kings of various castes were to rule, depending on political expediency. That kingship could acquire attributes of divinity was an established idea. It was reinforced from time to time by elaborate ritual sacrifices, initiated by the king, and observing the instructions of the Vedic corpus. They appear to have been more routinely performed by the rajas of earlier times, as now they were tending to become less common. A king performing these rituals could claim ritual power, but the more realistic foundation of kingship lay in a concentration of political power and in the accessing of resources. For the population, the grand sacrificial rituals were vast spectacles to be talked of for years. No doubt they kept the more critical minds diverted and created the appropriate awe for the king, who was depicted as an exceptional person, communicating with the gods, even if only through priests. The priests too were not ordinary mortals, since they were in effect the transmitters of divinity. Despite the earlier rivalries between the brahman and the *kshatriya,* the throne and the priesthood were mutually supportive.

The battle for political pre-eminence among the three kingdoms of Kashi, Kosala and Magadha, and the *gana-sangha* of the Vrijjis, lasted for a long period. Magadha emerged victorious as the centre of political activity in northern India, a position that it maintained for some centuries. The first important king of Magadha was Bimbisara, who realized the potentialities of a large state controlling revenue. Bimbisara became king some time in the second half of the sixth century BC. Alliances included marriage into a high-status family from Vaishali, as well as into the ruling family in Kosala, and these marriages furthered his expansionist policy. Having thus secured his western and northern frontiers, he went on to conquer Anga to the south-east. This gave him access to routes to the Ganges Delta, the ports of which were potentially important for contacts along the eastern coast.

Bimbisara established the beginnings of an administrative system, with officers appointed to various categories of work, and recognized the need for ministerial advice. The village was the basic unit of administration and has remained so. Officers were appointed to measure the land under cultivation and evaluate the crop. Each village is said to have been under the jurisdiction of a headman – *gramani* – who was responsible for collecting taxes, which were brought to the treasury by the officers.

The voluntary tribute and prestations of the earlier period were now being converted into taxes – *bali, bhaga, kara* and *shulka.* The terms used were the same as in previous times but the meaning differed. *Bali* is thought to have been a tax on the amount of land cultivated, that is, on the source of revenue, *bhaga* was a share of the produce, and the other taxes were of a variant kind. Taxes were therefore calculated on the size and the produce of the land, with the assessment being carried out by officers who also collected the taxes at a stipulated time, and of a specific amount calculated on the

basis of the assessment. These were the seminal activities of later revenue systems of great complexity. Whereas earlier the clansmen or the junior lineages voluntarily provided wealth to the ruling clans, now wealth was being extracted from those who produced it by those who ruled and the two were not connected through kinship ties. A peasant economy was being established. The difference between the ruler and the ruled, between the cultivator and his land, between the rich and the poor was now more easily recognized. The ramifications of governing a kingdom were a contrast to the more direct functioning of the *gana-sanghas*.

The landholdings of individuals varied in size and resulted in categories of owners. The richer ones were *gahapatis/grihapatis,* householders, some of whom became landowners, and the smaller ones were generally referred to as *kassakas/krishakas,* cultivators. An indication of difference was that the former employed non-kin labour in the form of *dasas* and *karmakaras,* while the poorer ones used family labour. When the state began to emerge as the major agency of action and production, there was more frequent mention of *varna* categories as hierarchies of status. The *varna* system was perhaps seen, from an upper-caste perspective, as more homogeneous than that of *jatis*. At the lower end of the social scale, cultivators and artisans were included in the *shudra varna.* Dependence on *shudra* cultivators was to increase, with the status of landless labourers being low even within this category.

Another trend that gained strength was that more and more land was claimed by the state, it being eventually conceded that the state had rights to all wasteland. This influenced the way in which the king was perceived. Initially, he protected his people against external aggression and his qualifications as a warrior were foremost. Subsequently, he was seen as the one who maintains law and order in what would otherwise be a kingless, chaotic society. This was explained by various analogies, the most common being that of what came to be called *matsyanyaya* – the law of the fish. It is said that in a condition of drought, when tanks dry up, the big fish eat the little fish. This is a chaotic condition which requires someone to maintain laws. Kingship was also explained through a contractual act, but in its working out there was usually the intervention of a deity. The person so selected, sometimes referred to as Manu, was appointed by the gods but carried out his functions in return for a wage that took the form of a tax and various other privileges. Control over wasteland was an implied privilege, made explicit in texts of the subsequent period.

Beyond the village were fields and pastures, and still further away lay the wasteland and the jungles. This juxtaposition had been expressed in the duality of the *grama,* settlement, and the *aranya,* forest or wilderness, later to incorporate the terms *kshetra* and *vana,* with the same meaning. That wasteland belonged to the king further underlined his right to take a certain percentage, generally one-sixth of the produce, as tax on the land that had been cleared and was under cultivation. The term *shadbhagin* – he who has a share of one-sixth – was to become a customary term for the king. Actually, of course, the tax could have been higher, as it sometimes was. Land set aside for royal farms, which was an idea that developed later, grew out of the notion of the king controlling wasteland. The king being a symbol of the state, it was probable that his ownership over land was conceded but in a somewhat ambiguous manner. Gradually, as the distinction between king and state became blurred, the king's claim to ownership was not seriously challenged.

Another social category came to be added below the *varna* hierarchy. The Chandalas were reduced to a status lower than that of the *shudras* and were to be designated as the untouchables. They are referred to in various ways in sources that could be of this period, although some would be of a later time, such as the Buddhist *Jataka* stories. It has been argued that the Chandalas, who came to be treated as untouchable, appear to have been people on the edges of settlements, either forced there by

encroaching settlers or requiring a habitat where they lived by hunting and food-gathering. They are described as having their own language, incomprehensible to Indo-Aryan speakers. Their occupations, such as weaving rush-mats and hunting, came to be looked upon as extremely low. Others have argued that they were groups who had been increasingly marginalized by the growth of towns, where they were required to perform menial tasks which became the source of their association with pollution in the hierarchy of ritual stratification. Expanding urbanization often trapped people at the margins of settlements into becoming landless and unable to use their skills and thus gradually forced them into performing lowly tasks. The presence of such groups, which became the epitome of social disabilities and prohibitions, points to the increasing authority of the upper castes in the kingdoms. The two categories of brahman and untouchable act as social counterweights, and the power of the higher required the depression of the lower in the *varna* scheme. Untouchability was perhaps the most degrading status clamped on any social group and was ethically quite unjustified. The combination of hereditary status with economic deprivation and social disabilities ensured a permanent and subjugated labour force.

The Pre-eminence of Magadha

Ajatashatru, the son of Bimbisara, impatient to rule Magadha, is believed to have murdered his father in about 493 BC to become king. He was determined to continue his father's policy of expansion through military conquest. The capital of Magadha, at Rajagriha, was an impressive city surrounded by five hills which formed a natural defence. Ajatashatru strengthened Rajagriha and built a small fort at Pataligrama, on the Ganges, which was a centre for the exchange of local produce. This was later to become the famous Mauryan metropolis of Pataliputra. His father having conquered the eastern state of Anga, Ajatashatru turned his attention to the north and the west. The king of Kosala was his maternal uncle, but this did not prevent Ajatashatru from annexing Kosala and continuing the advance west until he had included Kashi in his dominion. The war with the Vrijji confederacy over the control of the river trade, which was also a con frontation between two divergent political systems, one a kingdom and the other a *gana-sangha,* was a lengthy affair. It lasted for many years, with Ajatashatru's minister appropriately named Vassakara – the rainmaker – working towards a rift in the confederacy. A description of this war mentions the use of two weapons that appear to have been new to Magadhan military technology. These were the *mahashilakantaka,* a large-sized catapult used for hurling rocks, and the *rathamusala,* a chariot fitted with a mace for driving through the enemy's ranks to mow them down. Soldiering as a profession, with the need for a standing army, began to surface as a feature of the monarchical state. Finally, when Vassakara's attempts to sow dissension among the Vrijjis succeeded, victory was conceded to Magadha. It was a victory for monarchy in the Ganges Plain. Bimbisara's ambition had been fulfilled.

The rise of Magadha was not due merely to the political ambitions of Bimbisara and Ajatashatru, for, although the latter was succeeded by a series of unsatisfactory rulers, Magadha remained powerful. Magadha controlled nodal points in the Ganges river system that gave it access to the river trade. Fortifying the exchange centre at Pataligrama is an indication of the importance of this revenue. The conquest of Anga linked this trade to more distant places. Magadha was favoured by natural resources: the soil was fertile, especially for the cultivation of rice, and the expansion of agriculture brought in further revenue of another kind; the neighbouring forests provided timber for buildings and

elephants for the army, with ivory as a prestige item; and local iron and copper deposits added to the wealth and activity of the area.

Ajatashatru died in about 461 BC. He was succeeded by five kings and tradition has it that they were all parricides. The people of Magadha, finally outraged by this, deposed the last of the five and appointed a viceroy, Shishunaga, as king. The Shishunaga dynasty lasted barely half a century before giving way to the usurper Mahapadma Nanda, who founded a dynasty, short-lived but significant. The Nandas were of low social status, being described as *shudras,* and were the first of a number of non-*kshatriya* dynasties. Most of the leading dynasties of northern India from now on belonged to castes other than *kshatriya,* until about a thousand years later when royalty started claiming *kshatriya* status irrespective of whether or not they were born as such. The reference to the Nandas destroying the *kshatriyas* could be to their incorporation of the *gana-sanghas* of the middle Ganges Plain into their kingdom.

The Nandas are sometimes described as the first dynasty with imperial ambitions, a statement hinted at in the *Puranas*. They inherited the large kingdom of Magadha and extended it to yet more distant frontiers. To this purpose they built up a vast army, although the estimates by Greek writers are almost certainly exaggerated – 20,000 cavalry, 200,000 infantry, 2,000 chariots and 3,000 elephants being the least of the numbers quoted. These figures were intended to suggest a formidable opposition to the Greek army under Alexander, leading to Greek soldiers refusing to campaign further. But the Nandas never had the opportunity to use their army against the Greeks, since Alexander turned back while in southern Punjab and followed the Indus to its delta.

Another factor assisting the consolidation of the kingdom was that taxes were given importance as revenue. The methodical collection of taxes by regularly appointed officials became a part of the administrative system. The treasury was doubtless kept replenished, the wealth of the Nandas being proverbial. The Nandas also built canals and carried out irrigation projects even as far as Kalinga (Orissa). The possibility of an imperial structure based on an essentially agrarian economy began to germinate in the Indian mind. The Nanda attempt was cut short by Chandragupta Maurya, the young adventurer who usurped the Nanda throne in 321 BC. It was under the Mauryas, therefore, that the imperial idea found expression.

North-west India and Alexander

Meanwhile, the scene shifts back to north-western India, which, during the sixth century BC, had been part of the Achaemenid Empire. A little before 530 BC, Cyrus, the Achaemenid Emperor of Persia, crossed the Hindu Rush mountains and received tribute from the people of Kamboja and Gandhara. Gandhara and Hindush/Sindhu are mentioned as satrapies or provinces in Achaemenid inscriptions. Historically, this was to be a region with changing suzerainties, shifting between north India and Afghanistan and Iran.

Herodotus mentions that Gandhara was the twentieth satrapy, counted among the most populous and wealthy in the Achaemenid Empire. Indian provinces provided mercenaries for the Persian armies fighting against the Greeks in the fifth century BC. Herodotus describes them as dressed in cotton clothes and armed with reed bows, spears and arrows of cane tipped with iron. Ktesias, a Greek physician living at the Achaemcnid court in the early half of the fifth century BC, left a description of north-western India, much of which is fanciful writing, such as his description of what was believed

to be the tiger:

In each jaw it has three rows of teeth and at the tip of its tail it is armed with stings by which it defends itself in close fight and which it discharges against distant foes, just like an arrow shot by an archer.

Quoted in Pausanius, IX.21: J. W. McCrindle,

Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature, p. 210

Among the more famous cities of Gandhara and the north-west was Takshashila, or Taxila, as the Greeks called it. It rapidly became a cosmopolitan centre where Indian and Iranian learning mingled, to which was later added knowledge from the Hellenistic Greeks. Orthodox brahmans treated this region as impure, since Vedic rituals were no longer regularly performed. That Iranian and Vedic ideas and rituals had once been close seems not to have been remembered. Nevertheless, the mixing of Iranian and Indian forms was felt in various spheres of Indian life: Persian sigloi-type coins were copied in India; perhaps the idea of rock inscriptions used so effectively by the Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC was inspired by the rock inscriptions of the Persian King Darius; the script used widely in north-western India, *kharoshthi,* was derived from Aramaic, current in the Achaemenid Empire. Achaemenid control over some western parts of central Asia, as well as over Gandhara, brought the two areas under a single suzerainty, a connection which was to be repeated by various dynasties in subsequent centuries. Achaemenid ascendancy in north-western India ended with the conquest of the empire by Alexander of Macedon in *c.* 330 BC. Soon after this, north-west India was also to face Alexander's armies.

In 327 BC Alexander, continuing his march across the empire of Darius, entered the Indian provinces. The Greek campaign in north-western India lasted for about two years. It made little lasting impression historically or politically on India, and not even a mention of Alexander is to be found in early Indian sources. Alexander came to India in order to reach the easternmost parts of Darius's empire. He also wished to solve the 'problem of Ocean', the limits of which were a puzzle to Greek geographers. And, not unnaturally, he wanted to add what was already being described as the fabulous country of India to his list of conquests. The campaigns took him across the five rivers of the Punjab, at the last of which his soldiers refused to go further. Reports of the strength of the Nanda army may have been the cause. He then decided to follow the Indus to its delta, and from there return to Babylon, sending a part of his army by sea via the Persian Gulf and the remainder by land along the coast. The latter was a disastrous enterprise, since it was an exceptionally inhospitable coast. The campaign had involved some hard-fought battles, such as the now famous Battle of the Hydaspes against Poros (Puru), the King of the Jhelum region; the subduing of innumerable polities, both kingdoms and what the Greeks called 'autonomous cities', probably the *gana-sanghas;* the wounding of Alexander by the Malloi, and his revenge; and the extreme hardships of the army travelling down the Indus and along the coast of Makran. Alexander left governors to rule his Indian conquests, but his death, following so close on his departure, caused a state of confusion in which his governors soon left India to seek their fortunes in west Asia.

A significant outcome of Alexander's campaign, that was neither political nor military, was that he had with him literate Greeks who recorded their impressions of India, such as the accounts of his

Admiral Nearchus and of Onesicritus. These are vignettes of how the Greeks saw northern India. They sometimes provide a corrective to the fantasies in other Greek accounts, although even in these the imagination of the authors is not always curbed. Customs and practices of the north-west were not identical with those of the Ganges Plain. This forms an interesting point of contrast, indicating that the genesis of regional cultures varied, rather than growing uniformly out of a single, homogeneous culture. Furthermore, invasions often open routes of communication and points of exchange, even if inadvertently. The proximity of the post-Alexander Hellenistic kingdoms, some founded by the generals of Alexander, was not insignificant to Mauryan politics and commerce. Frequent references to 'autonomous cities' in the Indus Plain indicate the continuing presence of a variety of *gana-sanghas* in this region. These polities survived and had not yet been affected by the imperialism of Magadha, unlike the eastern *gana-sanghas* that seem to have succumbed to Magadhan power.

The Greek accounts remain a curious mixture of fact and fable, as much a comment on the Greek view of the world as an attempt to describe Indians. Greater familiarity with India in the ensuing centuries corrected some of their more incredible stories, but the attraction of the exotic could not be suppressed. The play on fantasies and marvels is of interest for what they perceived of India, but it also contributed to imprinting the idea of India with the mythical and the extraordinary in the mind of Europe over the centuries. Nearchus, Alexander's admiral, accurately describes the clothes worn by Indians:

The dress worn by the Indians is made of cotton produced on trees. But this cotton is either of a brighter white colour than any found anywhere else, or the darkness of the Indian complexion makes their apparel look so much whiter. They wear an undergarment of cotton which reaches below the knee halfway down to the ankles and an upper garment which they throw partly over their shoulders and partly twist in folds round their head. The Indians also wear earrings of ivory, but only the very wealthy do this. They use parasols as a screen from the heat. They wear shoes made of white leather and these are elaborately trimmed, while the soles are variegated, and made of great thickness, to make the wearer seem so much taller.

Nearchus, quoted in Arrian's *Indica,* 16; J. W. McCrindle,

Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian, p. 219

But the bizarre was always present and is repeatedly mentioned even in later accounts:

there are men said to be ten feet tall and six feet wide some of whom have no nose but only two orifices above the mouth through which they breathe. Some were brought to the court who had no mouths… they dwell near the source of the Ganges and subsist on perfumes and the savour of roasted flesh. Some had ears reaching down to their feet and they could sleep in them. And then there were ants that dug up gold and left it on the surface so it could be picked up.

Strabo, *Geography,* 15.1.57; J. W. McCrindle,

Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian, pp. 74-5

One of the most enduring images was that of Alexander in conversation with Indian sophists, one of whom is said to have accompanied him to Babylon. The subjects of discussion would of course have been embroidered upon with every rendering of the story. This image was seminal to the view that Indian ideas entered the Hellenistic and Mediterranean world subsequent to Alexander and contributed to various schools of thought that did not necessarily conform to established views in the European tradition. Some schools of agnosticism sought ancestry from the east. Neo-Platonism, claiming similar origins, survived for many centuries almost as a substratum philosophy in Europe.

Indians, on the other hand, did not say much about the Greeks, and what they did say varies. The term used for them in Sanskrit was Yavana, a back-formation from Prakrit *yona,* most likely derived from *yauna* – a rendering of Ionia that is mentioned in Achaemenid inscriptions. Yavana became a generic term for people coming from the west and was used as recently as the last century. Some later brahmanical texts were bitterly uncomplimentary and hateful about the Yavanas, perhaps because of a lingering memory of Alexander's hostility to the brahmans during his campaign, or perhaps because the Yavana rulers of the later period tended to be patrons of sects that did not conform to Brahmanism. Buddhist texts, however, were curious about the dual division of Yona society – the masters and the slaves – and saw this as an alternative to caste stratification.

Early Trade

Alexander established a number of Greek settlements in the Punjab, none of which survived as towns. It is probable that the Greek settlers moved into neighbouring towns, becoming part of a floating Greek population in the north-west. The movement of the Greek army across western Asia and Iran to India reinforced or opened up routes between north-western India via Afghanistan to Iran, and from there to the eastern Mediterranean. This was to accelerate east-west trade, and no doubt the small Greek population in India and west Asia played a part in this. As often happens, where there has been an exchange of goods there soon follows an exchange of ideas, and this was to become evident in the subsequent period in styles of art, in medicine and in astronomy. Earlier sources had mentioned the presence of people thought to be Indians scattered here and there in west Asia, but now the presence became more focused.

Routes going south into the Indian peninsula were introducing a new area to northern trade. The presence of the Northern Black Polished Ware as far south as Alagankulam, together with the distribution of punch-marked coins, would suggest at least the start of communication with the peninsula. Ujjain, Vidisha and Tripuri were to be linked to Pratishthana in the Deccan. The main trade routes, however, were along the Ganges River itself, going from Rajagriha as far as Kaushambi, and then via Ujjain to Bhrigukachchha/Bharuch on the Narmada Estuary, which was to grow into a major port for overseas trade with the west. Another route from Kaushambi, up the *doab,* went across the Punjab to Taxila, the outlet for the overland western trade. Shravasti in the middle Ganges Plain was also a point for exchange.

Goods continued to be transported in ox-carts and on pack animals, but the use of river routes allowed extensive transport by boats. Vaishali, Rajghat, Pataligrama and Champa are mentioned as important river ports.The texts begin to refer more frequently to coastal ports, such as Tamluk in the Ganges Delta and Bhrigukachchha in western India. The port of Sopara (in the vicinity of Mumbai), which became important in the Mauryan period, had its beginnings a little earlier. The fastest mode of

travel for the individual traveller was of course riding a horse, but for greater comfort a light horse-drawn carriage was doubtless preferred.

The appearance of towns made some changes in the landscape. More striking was the varied orientation towards towns in the texts, depending on authorship and world-view. From many perspectives the growth of towns marked a departure. A demarcation between urban and rural, although not sharp at this point, was nevertheless a beginning. Ramparts and fortifications, even if initially unimpressive, symbolize a demarcation. What was earlier a demarcation between the settlement and the forest now takes on a further dimension, with the settlement including the urban. The village had consisted of people often connected through kinship or occupation, but the townspeople tended increasingly to come from varying and unconnected backgrounds. The structures and buildings associated with towns required organized labour on a scale not familiar to village requirements, and this would have been one aspect of a substantial social change.

The town was viewed as much larger than the village. The size of Ayodhya, for instance, as given in the *Ramayana,* is exaggeratedly larger than the sizes obtained from archaeology for urban settlements in the Ganges Plain. Kaushambi, among the larger cities, is thought to have had a population of about 36,000 and covered an area of between 150 to 200 hectares. Most large cities such as Rajagriha, Ahichhatra and Shravasti covered a similar area. The texts were not concerned with giving a precise size, but with conveying the sense of an immensely bigger settlement than the earlier and familiar village. The area covered by the town included houses with gardens, although larger groves and orchards were on the periphery.

Much of the long-distance trade was restricted to luxury articles, the more commonly produced goods finding local markets. Goods were carried by various groups of people – pastoralists, itinerant craftsmen and more regular traders. Some activities associated with towns were to evolve into new professions that became prominent in the subsequent period. From the ranks of the wealthy, landowning householders – the *gahapatis* – there were to emerge the *setthis,* who became entrepreneurs of trade and financiers.

The introduction of coined metallic money facilitated exchange, introducing a qualitative difference in trading activities. Silver punch-marked coins became widespread legal tender, although copper punch-marked coins and cast copper coins also had some currency. The quantity of coins suggests the availability of silver, some of which was mined in Rajasthan. It is unclear who issued the coins, since the punch-marked coins generally carry only symbols. It is thought that they may have been issued by organizations involved in exchange since a few carry the legend *negama,* thought to be linked to *nigama,* connected to market activities. The minting of coins would have been another urban professional activity. The standard coin was the *pana* and the range of greater and lesser units would have been refined with usage.

Coins mark a radical departure in exchange relations. They provide a uniform means of exchange and accounting, and can bring about an increase in the range of goods, all valued within a single system. This facilitates long-distance trade, as well as connections between merchants. Investment bringing an interest becomes part of the financier's profession because coins can be accumulated and treated as capital. This also makes forward speculation financially viable. Another innovation linked to a monetary system was usury, but whether it was common and what the rates of interest may have been are not known for this early period. Brahmanical sources were initially opposed to usury, probably because it was central to the new profession of financiers who were urban-based and generally supporters of the heterodox sects. But the Buddha is said to have endorsed investment, presumably on interest, when he is reported to have said:

Whoso is virtuous and intelligent.
Shines like a fire that blazes on the hill.
To him amassing wealth like roving bee
Its honey gathering [and hurting naught],
Riches mount up as ant-heap growing high.
When the good layman wealth has so amassed
Able is he to benefit his clan.
In portions four let him divide that wealth,
So binds he to himself life's friendly things.
One portion let him spend and taste the fruit.
His business to conduct let him take two.
And portion four let him reserve and hoard;
So there'll be wherewithal in times of need.

Digha Nikaya, Ill. 188, tr. T. W. Rhys Davids,

Dialogues of the Buddha, Ill, pp. 179-80

The need to evolve a script may have been influenced by the use of the Aramaic script in Achaemenid Persia, spreading through Achaemenid administration and trade. A script assists both administrative and commercial activities. The inscriptions of Ashoka, dating to the third century BC, are the earliest examples of writing (other than the Harappan script), and seem to assume some familiarity with a script. The script may therefore go back at least a few generations. Although Panini refers to a script in his famous grammar of Sanskrit, the *Ashtadhyayi,* composed in the fifth century BC, this could have been the Iranian Aramaic which was familiar to the literati of the north-west. The date of potsherds excavated from fifth century BC levels at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, with graffiti in *brahmi,* would make this the earliest evidence of *brahmi,* but the find remains controversial. Isolated examples would require more supporting evidence before the date can be accepted.

Methods of memorizing the Vedic hymns involved a series of cross-checks, and analyses of Vedic Sanskrit already had complex rules. The foundation was laid for sophisticated linguistic analyses and it is debatable whether the absence of a script actually assisted this process. The grammar of Panini, although it was not the grammar of the ritual language – Vedic Sanskrit – but of the more commonly used Sanskrit, reflected an unusually advanced understanding of the structure of language and was remarkable in many ways. (It was, incidentally, seminal to the work of Franz Bopp and comparative philology in nineteenth-century Europe, and the birth of modern linguistics.)

At about this time mention was made of variant languages of the Indo-Aryan family. Vedic Sanskrit as the language of ritual developed differently from spoken Sanskrit, or what Panini calls *Bhasha,* and for which he wrote his grammar. This was to evolve into Classical Sanskrit, the language of those with formal learning. Panini's grammar was foundational to later grammars of Sanskrit and of other Indo-Aryan derived languages. It would be worth investigating why the grammar was written at this time. Was it written to prevent further changes in Sanskrit introduced by the currency of non-Aryan languages? Or did it provide a structure for the learning of the language, particularly for those not familiar with Indo-Aryan? Or was it thought appropriate that the oral tradition be given a written form? Panini is said to be from the north-west, yet the best Sanskrit according to some commentators was the language of the Kuru-Panchala area in the western Ganges Plain.

In the towns and villages the more popular speech was Prakrit, also derived from Indo-Aryan. This had local variations: the western variety was called Shauraseni and the eastern variety Magadhi, after

the regions where they were spoken. The Buddha, wishing to reach a wider audience, taught in a variety of Magadhi. The Buddhist Canon in the subsequent period was composed in Pali, an associated Indo-Aryan language. Urban centres were host to a variety of languages, so inevitably there would have been changes in the structure and vocabulary of these.

These features of social and economic life were closely linked with alterations in other spheres. It was doubtless this new situation that from the brahmanical perspective required regulations relating to social norms. Hence the composition of the *Dharmasutras,* setting out the social codes, social obligations and duties, and the correct behaviour for each *varna.* Creating social norms involved the adjusting of various practices prevalent among the societies now juxtaposed. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the listing of the legitimate forms of marriage that include the patriarchal practice of the father gifting his daughter to her husband-to-be as the best form, marriage involving bride-price as tolerable, with the lowest form being the kidnapping of the bride. That all these many forms were regarded as legitimate, although some received more approval than others, must have posed serious problems for the authors of the *Dharmasutras* in juxtaposing and accepting variant practices. An attempt was made to give some uniformity and homogeneity to the social regulations for the upper castes, whereas the variations in social custom of the lower castes were difficult to regulate. There was an underlining of upper-caste privileges with their counterweight of lower-caste disabilities. Lower castes and women are frequently bracketed in these texts and the subordination of both is exemplified.

Religions and Ideologies: Questions and Responses

The contestation or accommodation between the established orthodoxy and the aspirations of newly rising groups intensified changes in religious belief and practice and in philosophical speculation, resulting in a remarkable richness and vigour in thought, rarely surpassed in the centuries to come. The ascetics and the wandering sophists of the earlier age maintained a tradition of unorthodox thinking, and, in general, philosophical speculation ranged from controlled determinism to free-ranging materialism. Rivalries and debates were rife. Audiences gathered around the new philosophers in the *kutuhala-shalas* – literally, the place for creating curiosity – the parks and groves on the outskirts of the towns. This was a different ambience from that of Vedic thought where teachings or disputations were not held in public. The presence of multiple, competing ideologies was a feature of urban living.

Some of those expounding different ideas were identified as sects. This meant that they were small groups, usually supporting a single doctrine or belief, who had voluntarily come together. There were, therefore, a large range of sects. Their recruitment was not bound by caste, although they tended to use a language common to all their members and their aspirations were most likely similar. Much of our information on these comes from texts of the subsequent period, reflecting on the beginnings of philosophical thought. Some of these sects grew in number in the subsequent period through a following or incorporation and, where they were successful in finding support and patronage, they emerged as an Order, being referred to as various Sanghas or assemblies. These were characterized by a broader identity than the narrow conformity of the sect and could result in the breaking away of groups that then became the nuclei of new sects.

The Ajivikas were followers of a philosophy of predetermination – that destiny controlled even the

most insignificant action of each human being and nothing could change this. They had a body of monks – those becoming monks believing that this was predetermined – and their occupation was asceticism. There were various other sects, some supporting atheism, such as the Charvakas whose philosophy derived from materialism and challenged the ideology of Vedic Brahmanism. Man was made of dust and returned to dust, as described in the teaching of the influential Ajita Keshak-ambalin:

Man is formed of the four elements. When he dies, earth returns to the aggregate of earth, water to water, fire to fire, and air to air, while his senses vanish into space. Four men with the bier take up the corpse: they gossip as far as the burning-ground, where his bones turn the colour of a dove's wing and his sacrifices end in ashes. They are fools who preach almsgiving, and those who maintain the existence [of immaterial categories] speak vain and lying nonsense. When the body dies both fool and wise alike are cut off and perish. They do not survive after death.

Digha Nikaya, 1.55, tr. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India,* p. 196

The Buddha described such sects as 'eel-wrigglers', inconsistent in their teaching. Those who regarded them with scorn, such as those with orthodox views, accused them of immoral practices as is usual among confrontational groups. Brahman attitudes to them were particularly harsh, since the materialists objected to what they perceived as the senseless ritual and ceremonial on which the priests insisted, largely because it was their livelihood. References to materialist schools of thought were blurred in the priestly writings that have survived and, until recently, it was generally thought that Indian philosophy had more or less bypassed materialism. The participation of the Charvaka and the Lokayata groups in discussions on knowledge is now seen as more significant than was thought before.

But, of all these sects, the two that came to stay were Jainism and Buddhism, both of which were to become independent religions. Part of the reason for this may have been that theirs was a more holistic understanding of contemporary changes than that of other sects, and, in the break-away from the earlier systems of thought and ethics, they reflected a more sensitive response to the pressures of the changes. Jaina ideas, thought to have been in circulation earlier, posited previous teachers – the *tirthankaras* or makers of fords – with the claims to an ancestry of the ongoing teaching. Claims to an earlier succession of teachers were also made by some other sects. Mahavira gave shape to these ideas in the sixth century, and this led to the organization and spread of the Jaina sect which was initially called Nirgrantha. Jaina is a secondary formation from Jina, 'the Conqueror', which refers to Mahavira. He is said to have renounced his family at a young age to become an ascetic. For twelve years he wandered, seeking the truth, and eventually gained enlightenment. Mahavira's teaching was confined to the Ganges Plain, though in later centuries the larger following of Jainism was in other parts of the subcontinent, particularly Karnataka and western India.

Jaina teaching was at first preserved as an oral tradition, but later it was collated and recorded. Some Jaina sects take their cue from the final version of the Canon, edited at the Council of Valabhi a millennium later. Compilations such as the *Acharanga-sutra, Sutrakritanga* and the *Kalpasutra* are regarded as the early texts. The conversion, at a later date, of oral traditions to written forms is often a pattern with religious sects. This makes it problematic to ascertain the original teaching and separate it from interpolations. Jainism later split into two major sects, the monks of which were

either the Digambara/Sky-clad or naked, or the Shvetambara/Clad in White. Jaina history continued to be written, and was prolific in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries AD when Jainism was virtually hegemonic in western India.

Vedic authority was not accepted by the Jainas; nor was the claim that knowledge was revealed only to the brahman. The existence of deity was not central to early Jaina doctrine, which taught that the universe functions according to an eternal law and is continually passing through a series of cosmic waves of progress and decline. The purification of the soul is the goal of living, for the pure soul is released from the body and then resides in bliss. Purification is not achieved through knowledge, as some of the Upanishadic teachers taught, knowledge being a relative quality. This is explained by the famous story of the six blind men, each touching a different part of an elephant and insisting that what they had touched was a rope, a snake, a tree trunk, and so on. Each man sees only a fraction of true knowledge, which makes knowledge unreliable for salvation. The purification of the soul required living what the Jainas regarded as a balanced life, but this, as described by Mahavira, was only possible for a monk. Yet, despite the vow of renunciation, the monk or nun was dependent on the lay community. The monk's vow of begging for alms had as its counterpart the commitment of the lay follower to the giving of alms.

The vow of non-violence became almost obsessive: even the unconscious killing of an ant while walking was regarded as sinful. The more orthodox wore a muslin mask covering the mouth and nose in order to prevent the involuntary inhalation of even the tiniest of insects. No breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should be slain, or treated with violence, or abused, or tormented, or driven away, according to the *Acharanga-sutra.* The emphasis on *ahimsa,* non-violence, prevented Jainas from being agriculturalists, since cultivation involved killing insects and pests. Crafts endangering the life of other creatures also had to be avoided. Trade and commerce were possible occupations and Jainism spread among the trading communities. The encouragement of frugality in Jainism became an ethic and coincided with a similar sentiment upheld in commercial activity. The Jainas specialized in conducting the exchange of manufactured goods, acting as middlemen, with a preference for financial transactions. Thus Jainism came to be associated with the spread of urban culture.

Of the two near contemporaries, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha, the latter is the more famous since he founded a religion that was to prevail in Asia. The Buddha (or the Enlightened One), as he was called, belonged to the Shakya clan, and his father was the *kshatriya* raja of the Shakya *gana-sangha.* The legend of the Buddha's life has curious similarities with the legendary episodes in Christ's life such as the idea of the immaculate conception, and the temptation by the Devil. He was born in the sixth century BC and lived the life of a young aristocrat, but with increasing dissatisfaction after he came into contact with the sick, the suffering and the dead. Finally, he left his family and his home one night and went away to become an ascetic. After an austere period of ascetic practice he decided that this was not the way to achieve freedom from rebirth. He then resolved to discover the path towards liberation through meditation and, eventually, on the forty-ninth day of his meditation, is said to have received enlightenment and understood the cause of suffering in this world. He gave his first discourse at the Deer Park at Sarnath, in the vicinity of Varanasi, where he gathered his first five disciples.

This has been called the 'Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Law', which was the nucleus of the Buddha's teaching. It incorporated the Four Noble Truths: the world is full of suffering; suffering is caused by human desires; the renunciation of desire is the path to *nirvana* or liberation from rebirth; and this can be achieved through the Eightfold Path. The latter consisted of eight principles of action, leading to a balanced, moderate life: right views, resolves, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort,

recollection, and meditation, the combination of which was described as the Middle Way.

To understand this discourse did not call for complicated metaphysical thinking, nor did it require complex rituals. It required a commitment to ethical behaviour, a central feature of which was that it was not based on the privileges and disabilities of caste identity but on a concern for the welfare of humanity. Such an approach suggests a degree of sensitivity to the social mores becoming current in urban living. The rational undertone of the argument was characteristic of the Buddhist emphasis on causality and logic as the basis of analysis, particularly in a system where little is left either to divine intervention or else to the kind of metaphysics that the Buddha described as splitting hairs. The Buddha did not see his teaching as a divine revelation, but rather as an attempt to reveal the truths that were apparent to him and required to be stated.

To the extent that a deity was not essential to the creation and preservation of the universe, Buddhism was atheistic, arguing for a natural cosmic rise and decline. Originally a place of bliss, the world had been reduced to a place of suffering by human capitulation to desire. The authority of the *Vedas* was questioned, particularly as revealed texts associated with deity, and this was not specific only to Buddhism. Brahmanical ritual, especially the sacrificing of animals, was unacceptable. There was a closer association with popular, more unassertive forms of worship at funerary tumuli and sacred enclosures. Doubtless this relieved the austerity of an otherwise rather abstract system of thought. Independence from deities was also evident in Buddhist ideas about the origin of government and the state. Whereas Vedic Brahmanism invoked the gods in association with the origin of government, Buddhism described it as a process of gradual social change in which the instituting of the family and the ownership of fields led to civil strife. Such strife could only be controlled by people electing a person to govern them and to establish laws for their protection: an eminently logical way of explaining the origins of civil strife and the need for law.

In underlining elements of logic and rationality, the Buddha was reflecting some of the philosophical interests of his day. Freedom from the cycle of rebirth led to *nirvana,* interpreted either as bliss through enlightenment, or extinction. Thus the doctrine of *karma* and *samsara,* linking action and rebirth, was essential to the Buddhist system even if the Buddha denied the existence of the *atman* or soul. What continued was consciousness and this was modulated by actions. The denial of the soul gave a different edge to the Buddhist doctrine of action and rebirth. Implicit in the Four Noble Truths is the concept of *karma,* causally connected to desire and suffering. The Buddha's teaching was partially a response to the discourse of the early *Upanishads,* agreeing with some ideas and disagreeing with others. The disagreements were not insubstantial. But the teaching was a departure from that of the Vedic corpus and also a response to the historical changes of the time, among which were the emergence of the state and the growth of urban centres, posing questions that could not be answered by existing ideologies. The institutions that they generated were still in flux. The individual was involved in a struggle for status in the current defining of social hierarchies. The wish to opt out of social obligations was in part determined by these changes, and also by the search for answers to questions that troubled a changing society.

Unlike the brahmanical idea, the Buddhist notion of *karma* was not tied to the regulations of *varna* society, nor were social ethics measured by the rules of *varna.* The improvement of one's *karma* to ensure a better life was dependent on observing a code of social ethics based on the Eightfold Path and not merely the norms of sacred duties drawn up by brahmanical authors. The Buddha did not envisage the elimination of caste, as that would have required a radical re-ordering of society. Caste – whether *varna* or *jati* registered social status, and *jati* was important to determining marriage circles and occupations. The norms of ethical behaviour were distinctive and were irrespective of

caste status. The curiosity about the dual division of master and slave among the Yonas of the west was in its own way a questioning of the universality that was claimed for caste.

A subtle questioning of caste also lay in the freedom given to women to function in ways other than subjugation to rules of marriage. Despite the Buddha's hesitations, he was persuaded to permit the ordaining of women as nuns. This held at least an option for an alternative way of life, if only a limited one. The general hesitation in admitting women as nuns came from the notion that this would weaken marriage and family. The poems and hymns composed by the nuns that were later compiled as the *Therigatha* provide statements of considerable sensitivity on perceptions by women. That women could be lay followers and patrons allowed them a more assertive role. For example, cities of the Ganges Plain boasted of wealthy and accomplished courtesans, some of whom gave munificent gifts to the Buddhist Sangha/Order. Such women were respected for their attainments and were acceptable to the Order. A distinction was maintained between prostitutes and courtesans, both symptomatic of urban life, but the courtesan was admired for her accomplishments. Making donations was an expression of self-confidence, as it permitted women some control over wealth and the right to donate it where they thought fit. Again, this was a contrast to Vedic Brahmanism where women, although associated as wives with the patrons of the sacrifice, are hard to trace as patrons in their own right. The founding of an Order for nuns was a striking innovation, as there were increasing limitations being placed on the activities of women in the *Dharmasutras*.

The Buddha travelled in the towns of the middle Ganges Plain and later resided at the Buddhist monasteries that were established, teaching the monks and those who came to be taught. The Sangha was not initially encouraged to own property, but some provision was needed for a residence for monks during the long season of monsoon rains. The religion was congregational for most, but did not preclude those who wished to meditate in isolation. Monastic orders were introduced, the assembly of monks constituting the authoritative body, the Buddhist Sangha or the Buddhist Order. Monks wandered from place to place, preaching and seeking alms, and this gave the religion a missionary flavour. The Buddha's teaching came to be compared to a raft, enabling a person to cross the water of life, and it was suggested that the raft should be left at the shore so that it could assist another person to do the same. Later, when monks and nuns acquired residences, their monasteries and nunneries were built near towns, thereby facilitating the support expected from the lay community.

The establishment of Buddhist monasteries accelerated education, since they became a source of teaching, additional to the brahmans; even more important was the fact that education was not restricted to the upper castes. Brahman monks symbolized an ideological conversion. However, initiation seemed to focus on members of the upper castes to begin with, thus ensuring that people of status were entering the monasteries. The *kshatriyas* of the *gana-sanghas* who were not patrons of Vedic sacrifices were potential supporters of Buddhism and Jainism. Wealthy merchants, given a lesser status in the *varna* hierarchy, were respected by the Sangha and included among the patrons of the new religions. The inclusion of other castes as monks was a gradual process.

The organization of the monasteries was modelled on the procedures adopted for the functioning of the *gana-sanghas*. Regular fortnightly meetings were held, the views of monks were heard and decisions arrived at in accordance with the regulations of the Sangha. Dissident opinion, if it was weighty enough, could lead to a breaking away from the dominant sect and the founding of a new sect. The directive in the functioning of the monastery was that opinions were to be democratically discussed, with decisions arrived at through this process. This is likely to have been the prevalent mood in the early history of the Sangha, but by the third century B c mention is made of the expulsion of dissidents.

The Buddhist Canon, the *Tripitaka,* was recited and collected after the Buddha's death, but was probably not written until a couple of centuries later. It is difficult to separate the original teaching from the additions and changes made by his followers, or to give a precise date to the texts included in the Canon. Periodic councils were held, the first at Rajagriha, the second at Vaishali and the third at Pataliputra. These meetings would have introduced their own interpolations. The intention was to determine and define the original teaching and to record it. This also required decisions on regulations governing the Sangha if there was a difference of opinion. A major contention, for instance, was over whether monks could receive donations of money as alms. The question of accepting property as donation, as in the case of the parks gifted to the Sangha, would have required careful discussion and consideration since such donations were the thin end of the wedge, introducing the notion that it was legitimate for the Sangha to own property. The ownership was said to be communal, providing a residence for the monks, particularly in the period of the rains when they could not travel. Nevertheless, the ownership of property would have posed problems to a body of renouncers, as has been the case among monastic religious sects in every age.

Much of the Buddhist Canon was later translated into Chinese and other languages. This allows a comparative study of the Pali and the other versions that can assist a better understanding of the original intention. Buddhism was to undergo many sectarian breakaways, both in the country of its origin and in the course of its spread to other parts of Asia. Some forms claim an unbroken descent, but have in fact suffered historical vicissitudes that created breaks, in common with many sectarian religions. Theravada Buddhism is predominant in Sri Lanka and some south-east Asian countries. Elsewhere, the Sarvastivada has been more influential.

In recent times Buddhism and Jainism have often been included as a part of Hinduism, but the three were differentiated in contemporary texts. The prevalent elite religion at that time was Vedic Brahmanism, to which neither Buddhism nor Jainism subscribed. In fact, they were opposed to many brahmanical theories and practices, and provided an alternative through their heterodox ideas. Unlike Vedic Brahmanism, or the later Puranic Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism had specific historical teachers that have now come to be viewed almost as founders, had organized an order of monks and nuns and an ecclesiastical structure, were not concerned with a deity, did not perform rituals of sacrifice, emphasized the centrality of social ethics rather than caste distinctions and had a strong sense of the history of the religion with reference both to teachings and sects. The chronological focus in the case of Buddhism was provided by the date of the *mahapari-nirvana* – the death of the Buddha. This was calculated as the equivalent of 486/483 BC and came to be used as an era. (Recently this date has been questioned and later dates have been suggested, but there is no consensus on an alternative date.)

Buddhist and Jaina sects and some of other persuasions had orders of monks (*bhikkhu* – literally, mendicants) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*). As a general category they were referred to as *shramanas* or *samanas* – those who labour towards freedom from rebirth. This led to a distinction between what has been called Brahamanism and Shramanism, the two parallel streams of religious articulation that prevailed for many centuries. They are referred to as distinct by many, even by Alberuni, writing as late as the eleventh century AD. Monks renounced social obligations to take on an alternative life when they joined the Order. They lived as equal members of the Order, denying caste distinctions. But they lived in monasteries near villages and towns so that they could draw on the support of the lay community, namely, those who were Buddhists or Jainas but were not initiated into renunciatory groups. Lay followers were referred to as *upasaka* and *upasika.* Renunciation also gave the monks greater freedom so that they could concentrate on their own *nirvana,* as well as attending to the well-

being of the community. Renunciation was not necessarily identical with asceticism and a distinction between them might be useful. The ascetic ideally lived in isolation, discarding all social obligations and performing his death-rites before leaving home. The renouncer discarded the social obligations required through family and caste ties, but entered an alternative society – that of the Sangha, where new obligations were assumed relating to the life of renouncers.

With the increase in numbers of the lay community, the monks were called upon to perform life-cycle rituals linked to birth, puberty, marriage and death. This may well have been the beginning of a change, introducing a larger body of rituals than was originally intended. Places of worship such as the small *stupas,* or funereal tumuli, as they were at this stage, and the *chaityas,* or sacred enclosures, often at locations of sacred trees or local deities, were gradually incorporated into Buddhist worship and were later to take on impressive dimensions. The mounds at Lauriya Nandangarh in north Bihar are thought to be among the early places of worship and some have also provided small representations in gold of what might have been goddesses. The incorporation of popular religion was essential to any sect wishing to collect a following in an area.

Some persons became monks because they disapproved of the ways of society and expressed this by opting out. This was an act of individual choice and is to that extent expressive of individual freedom, although admittedly it was confined to joining an Order. Because these were renunciatory Orders a distinction was gradually made between the Sangha that consisted of the Orders, and the *upasakas* or lay followers, ranging from royalty to artisans, providing the support for the Sangha. The donations of the lay followers were not for a single, sacrificial ritual, but contributed to the permanent maintenance of the Sangha. When monasteries began to receive large donations and prospered, the life of the monk could become comfortable. This may have occasioned some persons, in search of a minimally comfortable life, to join the wealthier monasteries.

There was much in common between Buddhism and Jainism, Both were started by *kshatriyas* and were opposed to brahmanical orthodoxy. Although they did not call for the termination of the *varna* system, they were nevertheless opposed to it as set out in the *Dharmasutras.* But it took a while for them to build up a following of people other than those of the upper castes. When this did happen some of the practices underwent change. As with all historically evolved religions, the original teachings in new contexts were given new meanings, some of which contributed to changing the religion in varied ways. The readings of such histories of change requires a juxtaposition of the original teaching, together with contemporary texts as they came to be written in later times.

The historical transition from the sixth to the fourth century BC saw the expansion of agriculture, the evolution of towns and the beginning of commerce on a wider scale than before, and political authority in the form of the state and monarchy with some contestation between the two political systems of monarchy and chiefship. These changes were not unconnected with the new formulations in religion and ideology, distinctively different from what had gone before. Such formulations received a further and perhaps diverse assertion in the Mauryan period.