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The Time of the Buddha

Religions arose in many societies long before agriculture and pastoralism created the surpluses that led to urbanisation, and to the complex social structures by which large populations were sustained. Doctrines, as well as frequently performed rituals, probably helped shape a common identity within these large populations, leading to structured societies. Moralising religions emerged after the appearance of large and complex societies of more than a million people, with these often encompassing diverse ethnicities and several languages. The evocation of supernatural power within such moralising religions was intimidatory in intent, hanging over every head and threatening punishment to those who violated the morality and norms that, by consensus, were seen as necessary for social survival and development.[1]

Buddhism was one such moralising religion. It arose during a trying time, when state formation and urbanisation based on agricultural development had begun to take shape in South Asia. The Buddha, however, did not endorse a supreme god who exerted almighty and punitive power on those who violated the norms of morality; on the contrary, he created a cosmology in which the status of all living creatures could move up or down. Rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad deeds were believed to move creatures within a forever mobile hierarchy. This cosmology, which is the framework of the Buddhist religion – no matter the sect or school

[1] Whitehouse, *et al.*, “Complex Societies”, pp. 227–9.

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within it – has transformed the way of thinking about basic questions of life and death among its adherents and beyond. This success has been due in large part to the fact that the Buddha developed his doctrines from an understanding of the real and ground-level problems and sufferings within the society of his time.

Sakyamuni, meaning the wise man of the Sakya people, lived and spread his wisdom over a time of drastic change in South Asia. Cities, surrounded by farmlands, had begun to spring out of the fertile North Indian plains, primarily east of the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges, in a region now referred to as Greater Magadha.[2] Meanwhile, trade had connected these cities to areas across the Hindu Kush Mountains in Central Asia; Achaemenid Persia had extended its territory all the way east to Kandahar in Afghanistan and Taxila on the upper Indus basin. Though geographically separated by the core region of Brahmanical culture – Aryavarta – the Persian and later the Greeks who occupied the north-west region of the subcontinent did communicate with Greater Magadha, where non-Brahmanical cultures and ideas flourished and rapid urbanisation was happening.

The Buddha's homeland, a small ganasangha – a Ksatriya clan oligarchy – was located in a stretch of the Himalayan foothills. This tiny state of the Sakyas had evolved commercially and politically alongside the rising kingdoms and ganasanghas of the middle and lower Ganges plain. From around the sixth century BCE – regarded as the time of the "second urbanisation" of South Asia – a variety of big and small new states in this region were constantly vying for hegemony and dominance through war and diplomacy. While the Sakyas co-ordinated irrigation for farming with neighbouring communities and suffered the inevitable skirmishes with them, their arch-enemy was the powerful Kosala kingdom which eventually, within the Buddha's lifetime, annihilated the Sakya ganasangha.

Siddhartha, a young man of the ganasangha, saw the cruelty of warfare and the socio-economic disparity that went hand in hand with increasing agricultural productivity and material abundance.

[2] This region is called "Greater Magadha" in Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*.

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He was one of the earliest of those rare souls whose response focused most acutely on a specific aspect of social conditions, giving expression to it as the philosophical truth that the world is full of suffering and insecurity, and that the removal of these ills must be the goal of human endeavour. This observation evolved into the first and foremost truth within his doctrine of the Four Noble Truths.

It was a time when Brahmans and rajas, merchants and bankers, scribes and artisans, servants and slaves, courtesan-musicians and dancers, farmers and fishermen, and people from the mountains and forests all strove to move up, or at least maintain their status in the newly formed social hierarchy. Some of those from the low castes and outside the social core managed to get into the mainstream, but some never made it, and some born in elite families were cast out. The Buddhist sangha and other communities of dissidents were refuges for some of the unfortunate, while serving also as waystations for outsiders to get into the mainstream.

From stories embedded in early Buddhist texts, roughly contemporary Brahmana texts, and the earliest Buddhist artwork and messages inscribed on them, there hazily emerges the historical persona of the Buddha in the society of his time. Reconstructing the time of this historical Buddha means drawing mainly from the Pali canon, which is synonymous with the Buddhist texts preserved in Sri Lanka and the countries of South East Asia where Theravada Buddhist institutions kept such written documents. The Pali collection was the written-down form of the collective memory of the teachings of the Buddha. The first generation of disciples gathered after his passing to memorise what they had heard of his teachings. It took generations of Buddhist disciples to transform their memories into the written form of the Pali canon. Meanwhile, other early Buddhist texts survived in the Prakrit languages – for instance, in the Kharoshthi script of Gandharan Prakrit written on birch bark; of these, a number were dated to the first century CE. These manuscripts contain many texts known in the Pali Buddhist canon alongside some compositions comprising local stories unknown in the Pali collection.[3]

[3] Salomon, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhara*, pp. 7–11.

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The Kharoshthi texts may conceivably have been written down earlier than the Pali canon, but the texts written on birch bark are fragments preserved in jars buried in monastic sites in the ancient Gandharan region. It is likely that both traditions drew from the same sources of the Greater Magadha region, but the sangha at Sri Lanka seems to have made the more faithful effort to stick to the Magadhi sources. Because the Theravada Buddhist tradition has been alive all the way down to modern times, the sangha there can be said to have preserved the earliest available texts pertaining to the Buddha. "Thera" were the elders of the sangha who memorised Buddhist teachings. Thus, Theravada was the school most persistent in preserving these earliest memories. The compiler of the Pali Buddhist canon, Buddhaghosha of the fifth century, claims that Magadhi was the same as Pali, the authentic language of the Buddha, and that therefore the Pali texts represent the most authentic canon of Buddhism.[4] No doubt there was also a transition from Magadhi to Pali which added vocabulary into these Pali texts, drawing from the development of Buddhism in South India. And moreover, since generations of Buddhist monk-scholars copied, edited, and commented on these manuscripts to preserve the original teachings of the Buddha, they inevitably revised and altered the original texts in spite of their best intention.

In 1888 a group of scholars led by T.W. Rhys Davids – who had served as a colonial civil servant in Ceylon and encountered remnants of Pali there – formed the Pali Text Society with the purpose of collecting, editing, and translating Buddhist Pali texts. Their readings of these reveal a Buddha and his time unknown in the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Their Buddha seems a much more real and historical character. Unlike the hagiographies that form part of the Sanskrit Buddhist texts, the Pali texts portray the Buddha and his major disciples as people striving to find solutions in a world full of painful dilemmas. These texts provide details of the processes by which the core Buddhist institution, the sangha, took shape step by step.

[4] Skilling, "Scriptural Authenticity", pp. 1–47 (11).

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Since the time of the Pali Text Society's pioneering work in editing and translating several of these Pali texts, Indian historians – including D.D. Kosambi, J.P. Sharma, Romilar Thapar, and Uma Chakravarti – have striven to reconstruct the political, social, and economic conditions of the Buddha's time by drawing information, albeit critically, from the Pali Buddhist texts, the only literature that could have survived from around the time of the Buddha or very likely soon after. In her book on the historiography of early India, *The Past Before Us* (2013), Romila Thapar affirms the historical value of Pali Buddhist texts when saying that "the Buddha was a historical person whose life was seen by Buddhists not only as ethically exemplary but also a turning point in history."[5] Among the Pali texts is the *Vinaya Pitaka*, containing the disciplinary rules of the Buddhist sangha, which makes it especially valuable as a source of information for historians since it "describes the formation of the Buddhist community. Events are given a chronology."[6] This chronology is associated with the rulers of the time and from it emerges a sketchy picture of the political situation. Collectively, the Pali texts provide stories of monks, nuns, rich and poor patrons, and the Buddha's followers from the peripheries of his society. A group of Pali texts in a category called *Khuddaka-nikaya* (or Minor Texts) – including *Vimanavatthu, Peta-Vatthu, Jataka,* and *Apadana* – also provide much information, though they probably took shape much after the major texts. They comprise, in the main, didactic stories that could well have served as manuals for preaching and teaching.[7] The vagaries and uncertainties of circulation in the ancient world no doubt enhanced the value of some of these texts while diminishing the value of others, but the basic fact remains that their story lines fall within the geo-social context of Greater Magadha over the time of the Buddha. Thus it is reasonable to assume that the stories handed down in these texts contain something like a common memory of the time and society of the Buddha.

[5] Thapar, *The Past Before Us*, p. 381.
[6] Ibid., p. 399.
[7] Skilling, "Scriptural Authenticity", pp. 31, 36.

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Archaeological digs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries discovered the edicts of Ashoka, the third king of the Mauryan Empire, who reigned in the third century BCE, as well as Buddhist monuments dated to Ashoka's time and later. Epigraphic and palaeo-philological researches on inscriptions in the Greater Magadha region have demonstrated the similarity of language, syntax, and vocabulary between the inscriptions and the Pali texts. Artwork on several Buddhist monuments which appeared after Ashoka and the Mauryans depicts many of the characters and stories described in the Pali texts, especially those in the *Digha Nikaya* – a memorised record of the earliest teachings of the Buddha. These sculptural scenes on stupas in the Greater Magadha region were visual memories of the time of the Buddha. The Buddhist community in Sri Lanka, the major base for the preservation of the Pali textual tradition, has over the centuries regularly made pilgrimages and donations to Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha found enlightenment. Buddhist scholarship in Sri Lanka has therefore been closely connected to the earliest Buddhist site to maintain the authenticity of the Buddha's teachings as preserved by the community.

Stupas constructed since the time of Ashoka fanned out from the home region of the Buddha – the middle and lower Ganges plain – down to the Deccan Plateau. The narratives in their artwork all carry the imprints of the original locations of the stories they tell – Vesali (Vaishali), Savatthi (Sravasti), Rajagaha (Rajagriha). The sacred geography created by the early stupas has consequently resulted in a Buddhist identity among communities within and outside the domain of the Sanskrit and Prakrit languages.[8] Pali texts, inscriptions, and the artwork on Buddhist monuments have recorded the memories that made possible a historical narrative of the life of the Buddha and his time.

South Asia from the Buddha to Ashoka

The world of the Buddha in the Ganges plain was one in which the rajas of kingdoms and ganasanghas ruled over an elite class, as well

[8] Ray, "The Archaeology of Stupas", pp. 3–19.

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as a new urban upper class comprising gahapatis (householders) and setthis (elders and financiers). Collectively, this class dominated everyday life. The daily life of the new urban households had, however, to be supported by the new class of workers who maintained basic sanitation in the cities. The Candalas were people outside the caste hierarchy – they were the outcast. They cleaned out the garbage and trash from streets; inevitably they looked dirty and smelt bad and so were considered polluting, even though they were indispensable for making the city liveable. As they were pushed out of sight, their communication with the urban residents they served was minimal. The Candalas may well have evolved their own dialect within their own community, either based on the language they spoke before they joined urban life, or perhaps a pidgin variety of the language used by the people they served.

The political and economic networks of the ruling class also absorbed communities that lived on the peripheries of this society. Such communities included people who were out of the cultural pale of the Sanskrit- and Prakrit-speaking agricultural and urban zones. The Buddhist sangha flourished in the interface areas, with the sangha's monks and nuns wandering through the agricultural urban core as well as over mountains and marshlands where could be found a variety of cults – of Naga (cobra), Yakkhas (Yakshas), and kinnaras (half-human, half-animal creatures). The sangha's effort seems by contrast to have been to establish a simple and healthy lifestyle in relation to diet, clothing, hygiene, and sanitation, and this simplicity began to attract admiration and support among peoples of the various surrounding cultures.

From his observation of the nature and culture of his surroundings, the Buddha seems to have created a visionary universe encompassing all living creatures into a hierarchy notable for its flexibility. By positing a scheme in which the nature of rebirth depended on the quality of deeds done within a lifespan, it became possible for any living creature to move up the scale in its next life on account of having acquired merit through virtuous deeds performed in this life. Even the lowest ghost in hell could move up towards the domain of animals, asuras (aliens, especially Persians), humans, and the heaven

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of the Brahmanical god Indra, even if the ascent to godhead could take many lifespans. Meanwhile, bad behaviour could overcome merit and push the creature down to a lower level. This universe made room for hope and inspiration for everyone, including the despised poor and the feared savage, to aspire to a future life of dignity and respect.

Buddhist cosmology evolved in the geo-political and socio-economic environment of its time. The small Ksatriya oligarchy located on the fringes of the urban core of the Ganges plain from which the Buddha emerged was the storm centre of rising monarchies such as Kosala and Magadha, and ganasanghas that included the Vajji Confederacy – a grouping of several contiguous clans. In these many ganasanghas the Ksatriya elites made collective decisions on major state affairs and jealously guarded their blood purity, which meant ensuring their caste superiority by banning marriages with clans outside their own lineages. The Sakyas, for instance, traced their ancestry to a Ksatriya clan banished to the Himalaya foothills where the men had married their sisters to keep their lineage pure.[9] The Licchavis, a ganasangha in the Vajji Confederacy, tried purifying their Ksatriya status by staging an annual bathing ceremony in a sacred pond within their capital city, Vesali.[10]

The powerful kingdoms, such as Kosala and Magadha, allied with others, and meanwhile conquered some of the smaller kingdoms and ganasanghas. Eventually, Magadha annexed the Vajji Ganasangha Confederacy and had built the Mauryan Empire by the late fourth century BCE. A time of conquest and annexation might in itself have suggested the wisdom – or its extension and exalted form "enlightenment" – in actively engaging communities on all sides in order to mediate bloody conflict and reduce everyday suffering among the population at large.

While the Buddha and his sangha traversed the cities on the Ganges, the exchange of commodities and ideas linked the new

[9] Rhys Davids, trans. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, D.i.III.16, pp. 114–15.

[10] The sacred pond of Vesali had been maintained for many centuries, as witnessed by Chinese pilgrims. Archaeological excavation has restored this pond. See Falk, *Asokan Sites and Artefacts*, p. 220.

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urban core with the north-west section of the subcontinent. On the upper Indus valley Taxila became an international metropolis. It had all started with the eastward expansion of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. In present-day Afghanistan and the Punjab region of Pakistan, the Persian Empire had by the end of the sixth century BCE set up three satrapies – Bactria, Gandara (Gandhara), and Hindush. The satraps here were military governors assigned to these regions by Persian kings. Their major tasks were maintaining local order and sending tribute to the capitals at Susa and Persepolis. Persian governance of these routes also facilitated migrations between the various regions of a vast Persian empire stretching from Ionia to the north-west corner of South Asia.

After crushing the Persian army of Darius III, Alexander of Macedonia had marched into the Indus Valley around 326 BCE. Soon after, he had retreated from India leaving soldiers in garrison towns named Alexandria, including those at what are now Kandahar and Ai-Khanoum on the Oxus. After Alexander's death in 323 BCE his general, Seleucus Nikator, carved out the Seleucid Empire, which went from Mesopotamia to Central Asia and neighboured the rising Mauryan Empire. After Ashoka ascended the throne (*c.* 268 BCE), parts of Afghanistan and Punjab were integrated into the Mauryan Empire. The territory controlled by Ashoka thus included the cosmopolitan area centred at Taxila, where there was a Hellenistic neighbourhood adjacent to the former Persian governor's headquarters. Under the powerful Mauryan Empire the Greater Magadha region continued to defy Brahmanisation, primarily on account of the dynasty's own rise from a region in which many non-Brahmanical traditions flourished.

Sakyamuni and the Sakya People

The Buddha never saw his mother, who seems not to have long survived his birth. The earliest of his life experiences made him dwell on the "suffering of birth and death". Pajapati Gotami, his aunt, breast-fed him and raised him; she is believed to have loved her foster son and helped bring his message to the Sakya people. She was a

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woman allowed into the sangha at a time when no woman had been so permitted. When Sakyamuni preached in Kapilavastu, his home town, this aunt Pajapati saw it as an opportunity to plead for women being allowed to join the sangha.[11] After two more failed attempts – probably because the Sakya ganasangha was conquered by the Kosala king Vidudabha – Pajapati led Sakya women and walked all the way to Vesali, where the Buddha had taken up his abode, to join the sangha. There she cut off her hair, donned orange-coloured robes as bhikkhus (mendicants) did; her feet were swollen and her clothes dusty after the long journey, and she wept tears while waiting outside the preaching hall for the Buddha to answer her plea to join the sangha. Seeing her miserable condition, Ananda, the Buddha's most loyal disciple, who was also a Sakya, went into the preaching hall to exhort, on behalf of the women, that they be allowed to join the sangha. The Buddha was unmoved yet again. Ananda then changed his approach by asking whether women, in the teaching of the Buddha himself, could reach enlightenment. When his master confirmed that women were indeed capable of enlightenment, Ananda pushed his argument further.[12] At which point the Buddha nodded his head, granting permission to women to join the sangha. Pajapati thereafter came to be known as Maha Pajapati (the Great Pajapati), superintendent of the bhikkhunis (nuns) of the sangha.

The Buddha's Supporters in Cities

The cities of North India in this period were similar to Athens and other ancient Greek cities in that not all people living within them had equal political rights. In the ganasanghas, women had no say in public affairs. Only adult men who were the heads of their households had full rights to participate in public affairs. Such men were also called "raja", their title within their households being that of the king. In a small ganasangha such as that of the Sakyas, there were

[11] Rhys Davids, trans., *Vinaya Texts*, Cullavagga, x, 1, pp. 320–7. The following story is from this passage.

[12] Ibid., p. 322.

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about 500 such household rajas. In the city of Vesali, a common saying was that 7707 Licchavi rajas lived in the city. Though these numbers were proverbial rather than real, they do indicate extraordinary differences in the sizes of cities at the time.

In fact, the total population of a city was far larger than suggested by the number of fully empowered household rajas. Women, children, and young adult males awaiting their turn to become rajas of a Licchavi lineage were also resident in these cities, and moreover not all those resident in Vesali belonged to a Licchavi lineage. Cities were places of opportunity, so that many from a variety of different backgrounds moved into them, looking for ways to improve their lot in life. Though these outsiders could not join the Licchavis in voting during the making of public decisions, they could find jobs or set themselves up in businesses involving crafts and some form of trade. Perhaps most importantly, people of disadvantaged family backgrounds could leave their birth status behind in their villages or pastoral tribes to assume a new social status based on new-found pursuits in the cities.

Urban life, a new social and economic phenomenon in North India, thus attracted many to cities such as Vesali. These were bustling urban areas replete with new people, new ideas, and new professions. Altered lives also meant alternative outlooks, attitudes, and worldviews which challenged prescriptive Brahmanical norms embodied in the caste system. City immigrants had in essence escaped their original caste affiliations and could hide low-birth origins by denying association with the caste system. In the cities the labour of these newcomers was in high demand: urban life always requires skilled professionals such as scribes and physicians, and poorly paid labourers who keep cities clean and do the work that the well-off look down on.

The breaching of caste walls was not limited to these city newcomers. In Magadha military men who gained power called themselves rajas, and no one was going to set about making inquiries about their birth status. The Licchavis, the ruling elite of Vesali and of the Vajji Confederacy, however, said their own origins lay in the

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Solar Lineage, one of the two most prestigious Ksatriya lineages. While the Licchavis lived in Vesali and managed their public affairs collectively through discussion, debate, ritual ceremony, and the election of a chief raja as well as administrators, the Magadha monarchy ruled from Rajagaha, being assisted by Brahman priests and affluent householders and financiers. The Magadha kingdom claimed the most fertile rice paddy lands, the iron ore mines, and forests where elephants roamed. Traders and professionals travelled from city to city even as the rajas in Vesali and the raja in Rajagaha watched every political move made by their rivals.

In the confrontation between the most powerful monarchy and the largest ganasangha, the Buddha clearly took the side of Vesali. When staying in that city, he taught the Vajjians a strategy that could win the war against Magadha. This was that they must meet regularly, as ordained by their tradition, and act in concord; that they should respect the ancient Vajjian institutions; that they should defer to elders and listen to their advice; that they must not violate women against their will; that they ought to make oblations and maintain their old shrines; and that they should protect and offer alms to religious recluses.[13] In other words, he was saying: You Vajjians already have all the institutions you need to keep yourselves strong in the defence of your way of life. You must maintain solidarity and follow your valuable traditions if you are to avoid defeat by your most powerful enemy.

When the Buddha stayed in Vulture's Peak near Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha, its king Ajatasattu (Ajatashatru) sent his minister, a Brahman named Vassakara, to solicit the sage's advice. The Buddha told the shrewd Brahman that the Vajjians could not be defeated because they were following all their hallowed traditions, these being the very principles the Buddha had preached to his sangha.[14]

On account of his respect for the ganasangha traditions of the Licchavis and the Vajji Confederacy, the Buddha made several trips

[13] *Dialogues of the Buddha*, D.ii.74–5, pp. 80–1.
[14] Ibid., 76–7, pp. 81–3.

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to Vesali to provide moral support and guidance. When in Vesali, the chief courtesan of the city, Ambapali, was his hostess, offering him and his followers a big vegetarian feast. Though Ambapali was a courtesan, the Buddha, over his stay in the Ambapali Garden and his feast at her house, never saw her as a prostitute. Despite the proliferation of supposedly "fallen women" – they were mainly entertainers and performers of dance and music in the newly developed urban centres – the Buddha's view of Ambapali seems to have been uncommonly sane: he treated her as a representative of the Licchavis and the city of Vesali.

However, despite the advice the Buddha gave them, the Vajjians lost their battle against Magadha. Vassakara, the Brahman minister of Magadha, apparently sent spies to Vesali to spread rumours and provoke disputes and was successful in fomenting internecine war. The Vajjians fought amongst themselves and lost the force of will with which they had long defended themselves against external enemies.

Forests, Mountains, and Waters

Around the cities were cultivated fields and pastures dotted by villages where most residents were peasant farmers, largely Sudras and outcastes. Though low-status people, they belonged all the same within the Brahmanical cultural domain, sharing their understanding of languages and religious concepts with urban folk. Further from the cities, along routes linking them, lived people who were either exiles from mainstream society or original inhabitants of the mountains, forests, and marshlands. Because such populations did not share the languages and values of the new state culture, they and their norms were seen as irrelevant or beyond the pale by city and village people. However, they did have contact and interaction with the saints and ascetics of various religious sects who chose to leave the noise of the cities to dwell in worlds of thought and practise their religion in the more sylvan environment of forests. Conversely, many hunters and fishermen, having heard of the fantastic lives it was possible to lead in cities, sought opportunities there. Such men

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and women settled into various jobs and professions, high or low, whatever they managed to find. They were looked down on by the urban and regarded with suspicion. Meanwhile the communities they came from – people who worshipped snakes, trees, tree spirits – were not located all that far from the outskirts of cities. Among them were those who had not ventured for work into the cities, who had preferred staying where they were, sometimes to rob those traversing the countryside to ply their trade. There were always unwary or isolated travellers on routes that cut through forests, mountains, and rough terrain, all liable to be relieved of their goods by wayside bandits.

The dominant cultural domain may have been within the upper strata of states built by Indo-European-speaking communities spread across the Indus and Gangetic plains, but the people of the forests and marshlands, even if less powerful and disorganised, carried some weight within the economy. They not only populated the cities with fresh blood, they also provided cities and villages with the products of forests and mountains and waters, including iron ore and minerals, trained elephants for labour, meat from jungles, and fish from waterbodies. With the expansion of agriculture, the territories of these wild people tended to retreat more and more into the deep mountains and forests, though without ever totally disappearing.

Around 1000 BCE, the Vedic people had migrated eastwards along the plains that lay between the foothills of the Himalaya and the river Ganges. To wrest or claim lands that belonged to the indigenous population, they had had to pacify the local inhabitants through coercion and diplomacy. This meant, first, having to learn how to deal with the deities worshipped by local communities. When Brahman priests administered the horse sacrifice in Vedic societies, the rituals lasted an entire year in order to help a chief lay effective claim to the territory under his control. In these ceremonies we see priests trying to position and accommodate diverse cults, Vedic and non-Vedic, into a reshaped Vedic universe. Both devas and asuras originated when Indo-European speakers split into

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an Iranian branch and an Indian branch around Afghanistan. While ahuras became the dominant gods in the cosmology of Iranian culture, asuras became the arch-enemies of the devas in the Indian Vedic literature. Within the horse sacrifice, Brahman priests reserved certain days for the worship of various spirits, ranging from ancestors to ghosts, to convey the contours of their universe. On the seventh day of the ceremony, they allowed the asuras to stay and practice their magic.[15] That asuras frequently appear in late-Vedic literature and early-Buddhist Pali texts indicates that asuras, as the adversary of the devas, remained in the Indian cosmos. The Iranian branch of Indo-European speakers, who were mostly settled in West Asia and worshipped ahuras, were probably identified as asuras by those already resident in India when the ahura worshippers migrated into India, settling there and mingling with the local population.

With cities appearing on the Ganges plain and the Iranian Achaemenid Empire having extended its territory to the north-western area of the subcontinent with its administrative centre at Taxila, Aramaic – the lingua franca of the Persian Empire – prevailed in the north-west area for several centuries. It is reasonable to assume that people of Iranian culture who worshipped ahuras lived around the city of Taxila, and probably also in the cities of the Ganges plain, where they were called asuras by their Indian hosts.

In the horse sacrifice ceremonies Brahman priests also addressed lesser spirits, such as female celestial beings called apsaras and male ones called gandharvas, these being musicians and dancers.[16] There were also some less beautiful beings they needed to deal with, such as the king of the snakes, who headed the many snake cults spread across India; and King Kubera Vaisravana, a god who commanded many nasty beings such as rakshasas, villains, and robbers (*papakrita, selaga*).[17] Though these various spirits received different levels of respect in the ceremonies, none were totally banished from

[15] Eggeling, trans., *Satapatha Brahmana*, XIII.4.3.11, p. 368.
[16] Ibid., 4.4.7–8, pp. 365–6.
[17] Ibid., 4.4.9–10, pp. 367–8.

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Brahmanical sacred space. Kubera became a popular deity within many religious sects and was known as the commander of the Yakkhas (Yakshas in Sanskrit), these Yakkhas being a variety of creatures in human form, male and female. Some of them were benign and beautiful, others bloodthirsty and ugly, the whole an ensemble of robbers and thugs under the command of Kubera. In short, late-Vedic rituals included while also marginalising the cults of indigenous communities.

During the middle of the first millennium BCE, when states formed in most of the North Indian plain, the Buddha and other thinkers of his ilk were face to face with this colourful cosmos of deities, ranging from those of the Vedic traditions to those of the various cults worshipped by people migrating into villages and cities or who lived in forests and marshlands. Cults of Yakkhas, Nagas, apsaras, and gandharvas permeated all corners of this world and every new school of faith. Religious schools recruited their members from the communities who belonged to these cults, and people seem to have generally adhered to their cults even after joining the new faith. Theologians of the Jainas, Brahmans, and Buddhists all tried to conceptualise the plethora of spirits into some kind of system, and thus ended up with varying hierarchies depending on their own perspective of the universe.[18] Early Buddhists abhorred alcohol and blood sacrifices in Yakkha, Naga, and rituals of other such cults, but they did not condemn the cults as offensive.[19]

The Sangha of the Buddha and His Society

To approximate an understanding of society in the Buddha's time, recourse to definitive sources dating to about three hundred years later, when Ashoka consolidated the Mauryan Empire in the third century BCE, is pretty much inevitable. Ashoka held sway over much of the subcontinent, and in his time the contrast between state societies and "outsiders" became much clearer. In his famous Thirteenth

[18] Decaroli, *Haunting the Buddha*, pp. 10ff.
[19] Ibid., pp. 24–5.

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Edict, which inscribes his psychological devastation and moral regeneration in the aftermath of the Kalinga war and enunciates his determination of peaceful governance, Ashoka categorises his subjects as "Brahmana, Sramana, and all sects [*prashamda* or *pasamda*], and householders". Whatever their faiths, and whether they were religious figures or secular followers, these were now within the empire's mainstream and had to abide by his dhamma – the law and moral rules. Even the Greeks, called Yona by Ashoka, fell within the fold of the law-abiding subjects of his empire, though their religion was quite different from the one established by the emperor. Those who lived in forests, the Atavi – people who were not members of any of the recognisable religions but belonged to fancy cults of snakes, half-humans, and "ugly" humans – were given Ashoka's word that his policy of peace extended to them so long as they made no trouble in the settlements of his own people; if not, they needed to beware harsh punishment.[20]

Ashoka's empire reached the apex of the second urbanisation of the subcontinent with the addition of the solid infrastructure of a Northern Royal Highway and a Southern Royal Highway. These royal highways were lined with trees and resting houses and garrisoned by a standing army. These were the roads that connected urban dwellers with communities of different cultures and languages in the peripheries, people who sometimes came out and at other times retreated to their forested or wetland terrains.

The roads were not the only threads linking diverse peoples. Over the three hundred years or so of state development separating the Buddha and Ashoka, the former's sangha, Brahman rishis, the Jaina sangha, and other dissident religious communities forged another link between settled and urbanising civilisation with the peripatetic, the itinerant, and those in the hinterland. There is clear evidence of the dwellings of religious communities in deep forests, of missionary activities introducing cults and people there to the settled

[20] The two passages appear in several versions of the XIII Major Rock Inscriptions of Ashoka: Hultzsch, trans., *Inscriptions of Asoka*, vol. I.

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world. In much of the early religious literature, women from obscure backgrounds feature as consorts or as the mothers of major heroes in legends about state-creation. Shakuntala, the mother of Bharata – the greatest ancestral king in the Brahmanical tradition – was an apsara, or the daughter of an apsara, a beautiful woman with no traceable family. Her story first appears in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, which is part of the later Vedic literature focused on Vedic migration settlements in the Ganges plain.[21] The legend of Shakuntala then flourishes in the Mahabharata and other classical Sanskrit literature. In Buddhist Pali literature, a jataka story relates a similar plot, though without the name Shakuntala. The setting is the usual jataka story of a time when King Brahmadatta ruled Benares. The king wanders into the woods, where he encounters a girl gathering faggots. The king gives a signet ring to the girl as a token of remembrance if a boy happens to be born from their encounter. However, the king denies their union when his son arrives at court along with his mother, despite being shown the signet ring as evidence. The boy in this version is the Buddha in a former birth, i.e. a bodhisatta. The woman, whose name we never learn, challenges the king by throwing the boy into the air, swearing that no true prince ever falls to the ground; miraculously, the boy lands on the lap of the king. In due course he inherits the throne with the title King Kattavahan, meaning "faggot bearer".[22] Shakuntala, the faggot-gathering girl, represents women of obscure background from the peripheries who gain status by fighting for the inheritance and other rights of their sons. Most women from these marginal lands never acquired Shakuntala's fame or status, but several were assimilated into the mainstream because of the interface created by religious vanguards who made their way into the peripheries. Regarding the various religious traditions that Ashoka later recognised as legitimate schools of thought and faith, an abundant Buddhist literature and artwork on monuments allow us some insight into the origins and activities of women generically denoted by Shakuntala.

[21] Romila Thapar analyses the Shakuntala legend from antiquity to modern times in idem, *Sakuntala*, pp. 10–11.

[22] Chalmers, trans., *Jatakas* no. 7, *Jataka Stories*, vol. I, pp. 27–9.

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The Sakya people, alongside the Magadhas, Kosalas, and Vajjis, etc., all spoke a vernacular derivative of Sanskrit. The dialects may have varied but they all had Indo-European roots. In their speech they differed from speakers of both Vedic Sanskrit as well as the early classical Sanskrit defined by the Brahmanical grammarian Panini. In other words, the Middle and Lower Ganges catchment was the frontier of orthodox Brahmanical culture at the edge of Aryavarta – the supposedly pure land of Aryans.[23] The Pali language, which provides records of the earliest Buddhist speech, was probably a canonical concordance of the dialects of the region. The ruling elite and lettered people here did not speak Sanskrit but nevertheless considered themselves "Arya" (Aya in Pali), much as did Brahmans living in the so-called Aryavarta.

The urban centres of the region, as already noted, were well connected with each other and the world beyond – namely the more developed habitations of West Asia via the city of Taxila in the Indus valley, and the less developed mountainous areas to the south from where the Magadhans obtained elephants, timber, and iron ore. To acquisition such resources, enterprising setthis and gahapatis (traders) had to deal with people outside their own cultural framework, i.e. with those who spoke a different language and worshipped their own gods. Such communities, which lay outside the cultural domain of the Indo-European speakers, seem to have often assimilated into the dominant society through marriage alliances and associated rituals. These several subordinate communities who assimilated with the mainstream were not always male-dominant patriarchal lineages. Many of the Buddha's disciples came from communities in which mother figures had a higher status than the *pater familias*. Sariputta, meaning "son of Sari", was one of the Buddha's reputed disciples whose name was an extension of his mother's. A close bond between mothers and sons was a common phenomenon among the adherents of early Buddhism. Instead of male ancestor worship, these Buddhists concerned themselves more with the well-being of

[23] The heterodox features of the regions are well discussed in the Introduction by Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, pp. 1–9.

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deceased mothers. The universe of Sakyamuni, filled with a host of spirits, was one in which the dominant deities were male, but the more numerous deities were female. Those in the Vedic pantheon – as in the cults that joined hands within Vedic clan assemblies and are spoken of in the *Satapatha Brahmana* – were mostly male. The supreme Vedic hero, Indra, was still the dominant figure overseeing the universe at the time of the Buddha. Under the name of Sakka he interferes, mostly positively, within incidents narrated about the former lives of the Buddha. His heaven of thirty-three devas translates into a heaven of women who cook and serve in the Buddhist sangha but do not manage to join the sangha during their lifetime. In this heaven the devatas are virtuous ladies who reside in heavenly mansions and command huge retinues of female musicians and dancers, the accharas – the Pali version of apsaras. The achievements of these devatas are argued as exemplary, being used as educational materials to persuade Buddhist women to support the sangha by feeding bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. Those providing food to members of the sangha on a daily basis acquired enough merit to be elevated to this heaven. Moggallana, the great disciple of the Buddha whose origins lay in a matrilineal community, constantly brings such a message down from Sakka's heaven to the world, this being expounded in a Buddhist Pali text, *Vimanavatthu* (Stories of Mansions).

Though operating a patriarchal system of power and property inheritance, the new states and cities were also clearly recruiting members from matrilineal communities that were engaged in hunting, fishing, and gathering. From the margins, in other words – from forests, mountains, and waters outside the region of villages surrounded by rice paddy lands – came many outstanding women who became leaders of the new states in their urban centres, such as Ambapali of Vesali and the legendary Shakuntala. Only a few women, however, entered the inner circles of power in these newly founded states. Most women who found their way to the cities from the margins filled other urban roles. Salavati, a courtesan in Rajagaha, established a business around entertainment and prostitution in

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