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THE GENESIS OF STATE IN INDIA: POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING AND EVOLUTION. PART I

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उत्तरं यत्समुद्रस्य हिमाद्रेश्चैव दक्षिणम् ।
वर्षं तद्भारतं नाम भारती यत्र सन्ततिः ॥ १ ॥
जम्बूद्वीपः समस्तस्य द्वीपचक्रस्य मध्यगः ।
तत्रापि भारतं वर्षं कर्मभूमिरुदाहृता ॥ २ ॥

The country (varṣam) that lies north of the ocean
and south of the snowy mountains (Himalayas) is called Bhārata
and there dwell the descendants of Bharata.
Jambudvipa lies at the very center of all the concentric island-continents;
and even within it, Bhārata-varṣa is uniquely celebrated
as the land of action (Karmabhumi)[2]

The culmination of state in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab was an ecologically determined, technologically accelerated pristine process where urbanization and state structures co-evolved through peer polity interaction and interstate imitation of the institutions with overt deviations in form but nevertheless functioning in the same domain. This paper utilizes a multidisciplinary methodology combining the historical - philological stratification of early legal texts from varying backgrounds of analysis (*Arthashastra*), morality and righteousness (*Shanti Parva* of *Mahabharata*). It also utilizes the meteorological and spatial evidences found in the second urbanization of the Indian subcontinent in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. It utilizes a historical-comparative framework detailing the legal structures, political structures and the different philosophical understandings feeding the development of these systems in the different *mahajanapadas*. It charts the institutional, development of the *janas* to *janapadas* and *mahajanapadas* mapping the territorialization of clans coming together to form either republics or monarchies. It analyses the co-evolution of surplus management, fiscal tools, standardization of metrological devices and urban space to understand the early state sovereignty and the emergence of state in India.

Keywords: *mahajanapadas*, metrology, peer polity, sovereignty, state, *danda*, bureaucracy

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[2] Tr. by H. H. Wilson [Wilson, 1840, III, verse1-2].

ГЕНЕЗИС ГОСУДАРСТВА В ИНДИИ — ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЕ ВОСПРИЯТИЕ И ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ. ЧАСТЬ I

Абхиджит Сингх

उत्तरं यत्समुद्रस्य हिमाद्रेश्चैव दक्षिणम् ।
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Страна (varṣam), лежащая к северу от океана
И к югу от снежных гор (Гималаев) зовется Бхаратой.
Здесь обитают потомки Бхараты.
Джамбуддвипа лежит в самом центре
всех концентрических островов-континентов
И даже внутри, страна Бхарата прославляется
как земля (праведных) деяний

Кульминация государствообразования в двуречье Ганги и Ямуны (Джамны) была экологически предопределенным и технологически ускоренным изначальным процессом, где урбанизация и государственные структуры развивались путем взаимодействия равных политий и межгосударственной имитации институтов, внешне различных, но функционировавших в одной области. Статья использует мультидисциплинарную методологию, соединяющую историко-филологическую стратификацию ранних законоведческих текстов разного происхождения («Артхашастра») и трактатов по морали и праведному поведению («Шанти-парва» из «Махабхараты») с метеорологическими и археологическими данными по второй урбанизации Двуречья. Она также применяет историко-сравнительный метод для анализа законодательных и политических структур и различные философские подходы к развитию этих систем в различных *махаджанападах* (ранних государствах). Это позволяет проследить институциональное развитие от союзов племен (*джана*) к *джанападам* (прото-государствам) и *махаджанападам*, исследовать территориализацию кланов, объединявшихся в республики или монархии, проанализировать совместную эволюцию методов управления прибавочным продуктом, налоговых инструментов, стандартизации метрологических устройств и городского пространства для понимания ранних форм государственности в Индии.

Ключевые слова: махаджанапады, метрология, взаимодействие равных политий, суверенитет, государство, *данда*, бюрократия

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Introduction

The concept of state and the understanding of ecology as a giver of life and resources have been traditionally understood since times immemorial in the Indian subcontinent. The concept of nature as mother and ecology as the sustainer of life in ingrained in the imagination of people and cultural traditions of the population. Since the Indus Valley civilization ((IVC),

the understanding of the community as a collective system was nuanced and complex. The finding of stamped[3] and holed clay tablets from Mesopotamia points to the fact of an understanding among the people of IVC about state and borders and a sense of belongingness to their own state or whatever they referred to their collective community existence. The seals were not just a mark of a border but a broader understanding of trade networks and interstate economic handling of raw materials and finished products. The tokens were round with an impression of a unicorn and perfect round and plain back side which showcased that this was a pass representing the seal owner and not associated with goods [Kenoyer, 1998, pp. 88,190].

The Indian city states are not a derivative or an exposition of an outside model on the Indian subcontinent. They rose from within the geography, had their own models of *gana-sanghas* (republics) or the city states (*mahajanapadas*[4]). To club them with the western models of city state development in Greece or Italy would not be a correct mapping of history. The basis of development of the state was provided by ecology (the river systems), technological breakthrough (the iron ore deposits in the geography of the Chota Nagpur plateau) and the concept of surplus production which made it possible to trade, have a budget for a standing army, led to the redevelopment of currency, the ancient *kahapana* [Gupta, Hardaker, 1985, pp. 25–30], there is an understanding that these coins were issued by the bankers but to understand the financial system it is highly imperative to note that these systems even if used by the merchants were rapidly absorbed by the states and even finds mention the works of Chanakya [Kangle, 1965, pp. 106–108] and Panini[5] [Agarwala, 1953, pp. 266–269], who talk about the detailed uses and also the techniques used to punch mark these coins.

The state system in the Ganga- Yamuna doab was an evolution which was original in nature defined and shaped by the factors of environment, geography, trade and fiscal behaviour and technological advancements. The transition from the Vedic *jana* (tribal units) to the *janapada* (territorial state) and eventually the *mahajanapada* (the great territorial state), the name *mahajanapada* is used not in the manner of literal English translation which is great but as an expression of the greatness of development on an institutional, social, political and economic level. The consolidation of rule was made in a manner which shifted away from clan-based politics to the politics of a centralized state where the discussions among the people were kept intact but the rule formations and execution was centralized to make the entire state machinery robust and suited to the vast economy and the territorial extent of the new reality of the *janapada*.

The territorialization of power was a watershed event in the history of India, an event shaped entirely within the boundaries of Indian subcontinent). The power was transitioned from clan to geography and identities were formed on the basis of belonging to a geographical domain. This shift was both ceremonial and procedural with each aspect working to consolidate the goals of the legitimacy of the state. Ceremonies made people aware that some grand and divine event is taking place marking

[3] For Reference, https://www.harappa.com/blog/ancient-indus-passports#:~: text=Each has a hole in into each of them. [дата обращения: 25.05. 2026].

[4] *Mahajanapada* refers to the sixteen major kingdoms or republics that existed in ancient India during the 6th-4th centuries BCE. These were large territorial states, each governed by a king or a republican assembly, and are considered the political and economic centers of early historic India. Reference: https://buddhist-spirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/DighaNikaya.pdf?utm_source=openai. [дата обращения: 26.05. 2026].

[5] *Śreṇī* (guild): In Sūtra 2.1.59 (*Śreṇyādayaḥ kṛtādibhiḥ*), Pāṇini notes the grammatical compounding of the word *śreṇī*. In the economic context of the *mahajanapadas*, a śreṇi defined an assembly of artisans or traders belonging to different castes but following a common profession, operating under a unified set of bylaws and working with joint corporate capital.*Pūga* (corporate craft groups): In Sūtra 5.2.52 and Sūtra 5.3.112, Pāṇini discusses the corporate entity known as *pūga*. Unlike the *śreṇī*, which was highly economic and professional, a *pūga* was a localized corporate group comprised of various castes and crafts, often functioning as neighborhood economic collectives or municipal associations that could pool funds.

the ascension of the ruler to the highest position in their community imagination and understanding. The state sponsored mechanism which led to this ceremony being understood from the focal point of state and associated rituals of the ruling class of the territory made sure that people gave highest regards and inherent acceptance to the state itself. The procedural aspect of the ceremonies made sure that the population understood the ceremony as a political event and imbibed it within their social understanding and life. The possibility of internal dissent to the rule was taken away by appropriating the legitimacy of the state not from the top but from the bottom, that is, the people themselves giving their allegiance to the geographical domain being governed by the apparatus of the state rule. As the tribes settled, these processes were not compartmentalized as mere social or political events but as a combined complex culmination into the *mahajanapada*s having an economy based upon these processes and together forming a state structure filled with four major components: geography, population, economy and political understanding and allegiance.

Theoretical Conceptualization of the formation of city-states in India

1) Evolution and foundation of city-states

-A-

To simply say that the system of the city states just evolved from point zero is a misconstruction of facts. The city state formation was not a random and sudden formation but gradual and deeply churned local phenomenon which had no ideological or foundational model from outside the subcontinent. The quest that the Greek city-states [Murray, 1996, p. 1205][6] was the basis of the city states in India is a misleading argument. There was no pre-existing blueprint model for the city states of India. The Achaemenid empire [Kurt, 2007, pp. 1–2][7] of Persia was not even remotely connected to the geographical location of the city states of India, it was on the fringes of the Indus River, the city states were already formed and consolidating into further structures of political and social uniqueness. The gradual rise of these city states was driven by several factors like advances in irrigation and its techniques, the use of wet rice cultivation to produce a massive amount of food for the population which made nomadic life unsustainable and unnecessary burden.

The concept of voluntary clan gifts like *bali*[8] was institutionalized as a necessary contribution mandated by the state laws, this tradition marked the biggest turning point in the history of the state formation in India. As the Vedic tribes transitioned from a semi-nomadic pastoral economy to settled agriculture in the Later Vedic Period, 1000–600 BC, the nature of *bali* shifted radically. What began as a voluntary, irregular clan gift evolved into a compulsory, regulated tribute collected by specialized royal

[6] The ancient Greek city-state, fundamentally known as the polis (plural: poleis), is defined in classical scholarship not merely as a geographic locality, but as a distinct political, social, and sovereign community. Reference: https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Pyrenae/article/download/317515/407605/ [дата обращения: 26.05. 2026]. In classical antiquity, a useful and widely accepted baseline definition is provided by Oswyn Murray in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, which describes the polis as: 'an urban community or state, disposing of its own geographically delimited territory, and characterized by small size, political autonomy, social homogeneity, sense of community, citizenship and respect for civic law'. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198606413.001.0001/acref-9780198606413-e-5162?rskey=iJMVuD&result=1 [дата обращения: 26.05. 2026].

[7] The Achaemenid Empire (circa 550–330 BCE), often referred to as the First Persian Empire, was an ancient Iranian empire founded by Cyrus the Great. At its peak under Darius I and Xerxes I, it spanned from the Balkans and Egypt in the west to the Indus Valley in the east, making it the largest empire the ancient world had yet seen.

[8] In the context of early South Asian history — specifically during the Early Vedic Period (circa 1500–1000 BCE)—*bali* refers to a voluntary offering, gift, or tribute presented by members of a clan (vis) to their tribal chief or king (*rajan*).

officers (*bhagadughas*), forming the earliest historical foundation for formal taxation in ancient India [Thapar, 1983, pp. 68–71, 81–84].

The culmination of the city states in in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab was a result of rigorous processes that gradually changed the way of life of the people. The availability of surplus food and the tradition from *bali* to *bhaga* led to the formation of a state institution where the state could utilize the surplus resources to mobilize the aims of consolidating the geography and the move towards a holistic and more nuanced development to secondary state institutions. Thirdly, the availability of surplus was dependent upon the technology of processing the Iron and the availability of high-quality iron ore which led to development of the agricultural lands which reduced a large extent the semi nomadic lifestyle and permanent settlements came into existence. This resulted in a statehood in the region which was original and pristine [Service, 1975, pp. 1–14].

-B-

Though the development of state in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab was an original institutional, socio-political and Economic development but it is with a very important caveat, the political structures rose independently but they did not come to life out of the blue. The material and the technological conditions which favoured their development were accelerated by the secondary historical processes. It was an endogenous pristine development dependent upon the technological continuity that was inherited from the Indus Valley civilization almost more than a millennia ago. The availability of the knowledge of copper metallurgy along with the knowledge of long-distance trade routes and the advanced concepts of weights and measures which were developed in the Indus Valley must have influenced and given a further push to the *mahajanapad*a understating of economy and trade.

From this standpoint let's dive into the second important theoretical framework critical to understand the continuous development of the state and its upgradation in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. The ecology and technology provided the push for development, the development of trade and permanent settlement gave life to an understanding of the state as an entity having population, institutions and a king and the surplus production gave wings to the trade and inter-city and intra-city movement of goods, thanks to the major river systems which acted as the arteries of trade and further developed the state system in the region. But what about the cross cultural and institutional effects, saying that the states developed and stayed in vacuum and developed in a closed loop as something impossible?

Usually, it is understood that when such a rise of systems take place, there is one system which becomes primary and holds monopoly over the entire matrix of resources and power and such a development is caused by mono-causal, all-encompassing factor. In the case of the development of Indian city-states, there was no primary of secondary factor; there was a multitude of factors and in the beginning of this reality there was no monopoly of resources of trade or in typical sense of the state having the most powerful military. The sixteen *mahajanapada*s of India developed simultaneously and together with each state having a specialization of one sort or the other and they acted as supplementary textbook style high intensity driven network of institutional and material exchange.

The constant geopolitical friction within the *mahajanapada*s led to the formation of a political understanding that each state must strive militarily to remain competitive and survive. The constant push and pull in technological advantages among the monarchies of Kosala [Raychaudhuri, 1923, pp. 45–54][9], Vatsa and Magadha among others led to evolutionary changes with the passage of time. The

[9] Kosala's military advancements allowed it to expand rapidly out of its core territory in the fertile plains of modern Awadh (Uttar Pradesh), eventually annexing the wealthy kingdom of Kashi and waging a protracted, decades-long war against Magadha. Its military apparatus, heavily detailed in early Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical texts, was built on structural, infrastructural, and strategic innovations. A major military advancement was the fortification of its capitals to survive prolonged sieges. Kosala

clash of republican Vajji [Law, 1922, pp. 45–56][10] with monarchial Magadha points to this evolutionary mindset and staying relevant in the political- economic set- up of those times.

Despite being in the atmosphere of intense push and pull and military confrontation, the *mahajanapada*s had an excellent flow of ideologies and trade. The elements of luxury in one part were immediately emulated and a new version was created in other parts as well. The phenomenon of keeping up was not just limited to military discipline and design but also extended to things of value and daily life. The concept of Northern Black Polished Ware[11] ceramics was a uniform phenomenon across the board. It was not just commodities but the medium of exchange itself was understood by all the *mahajanapada*s and a dedicated rule was followed for the concept of money which was favoured among all the sixteen states. The coins were punch marked for identification and the weight of all the coins was based upon the weight of *ratti* seeds[12] which was a practice of standardization across the geographical extent [Shamasastry, 1915, p. 103; Agarwal, 1953, pp. 258–264; Bühler, 1886, pp. 276–278].

The understating that all sixteen *mahajanapada*s had friction between them owing to several factors does not diminish the fact they were equally collaborating with each other and indulged in trade and shared ideological and material development. This explains the peer-polity [Renfrew, Cherry, 1986, pp. 1–18] interaction was going on in full swing which explains the highly sophisticated self-regulating interstate system. The urbanism and statehood were going in a horizontal matrix in the same time period where the instinct to remain relevant militarily on one hand and the survival of the state, on the other, pushed multidirectional development in all the domains of life and led to 'fusion styled going up spiral' in the length and breadth of ancient Indian geography.

-C-

The city states not only were geographically adjacent but administratively competent units existing alongside each other in different formats — the Sangha (confederation version) like the Vajjis and the monarchies (kingship version) like Magadha. The power structure was playing out simultaneously — the demarcation of geographical borders between the *mahajanapada*s and the quantification of power via fiscal means, and standardization of measures and weights for administrative efficiency within the states and trade among the states. The city states utilized a central control model — that is a geographical area acting as an epicenter of trade, all incoming and outgoing traffic of people and goods was centered in this specific region so it also serves as the capital of the monarchy or the confederacy.

The states transformed the wilderness and the forests from unmapped zones to zones directly under the state control for the purpose of mining, resource extraction and timber. This way the state mapped its authority over the vast lands and thus fulfilling an important aspect of state building process. This resource area was not left alone but connected to the other part of the state by road arteries crisscrossing through the length and breadth of the city-state. One such example is the formation of the Uttarapatha [Chandra, 1977,

systematically shifted and fortified its centers of power based on strategic requirements: Ayodhya and Saketa: Maintained as critical fortified positions along key riverine trade routes. Serving as the capital during Kosala's historical peak, archaeological excavations show that Shravasti was protected by a massive, semicircular earthen rampart topped with brick fortifications and flanked by deep moats.

[10] The Vrijji (Vajji) Confederacy — dominated by its primary constituent clan, the Lichchhavis of Vaishali — stood as the preeminent republican power (Gana-Sangha) in ancient India during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. Unlike the monolithic hereditary monarchies of the Gangetic plain, the political and military system of the Vajji republic was built on decentralized corporate governance and collective elite mobilization.

[11] Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) is one of the most technologically advanced and prestigious pottery types of ancient India, acting as a crucial archaeological marker for the Second Urbanization of the Indian subcontinent.

[12] Before the introduction of standardized metal weights, ancient Indian merchants and state authorities utilized the seeds of the Abrus precatorius plant (variously spelled *ratti*, *ratty*, or *gunga*).

pp. 3–8][13]. The sovereign aspect of the city states was not left undefined but given a concrete meaning and quantified in a manner which still is used for defining the sovereignty of the modern state. The metrology was the ultimate administrative technology of the early state system. The punch marked coins based upon a universal value and agreed upon by all the city states represents a legal rational economic authority.

Going by these arguments it is safe to conclude that the city states represented the textbook example of spatial-metrological model and it demonstrates the culmination of statehood in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab was fundamentally an administrative leap. The Indian city-state model did not claim just territory but systematically defined power in terms of geography and administrative output. It also resulted in a highly specialized and comparative forms of state arrangements, one in the form of republics and other in the form of monarchy. To put a comparative perspective of the different models of city state systems Max Weber's ideal type [Weber, 1949, pp. 49–112][14] provides a brilliant analytical tool to map the differences and understand how from *mahajanapada*s the pan Indian empire (Mauryan Empire) was formed.

Table 1. Drawing a comparison between the monarchy and sangha system in the mahajanapadas

	Ideal type 1 – The Gana Sangha (Oligarchic Republic)	**Ideal Type 2- Monarchy**
Authority and Legitimacy	Power is vested in the Sangha visa consensus and voting, no single rule. The affairs of power are handled by kinships based on clans.	Power is vested in one centre that is the King. Legitimacy is individual, sacred and hereditary.
Administrative Staff	Non - Bureaucratic and Egalitarian. The office of the king and ministers are election based and rotational in nature.	A specialized separate administrative machinery. The entire system is divided into responsible ministries all overseen and supervised by the king, king being the end reporting node for all departments.
Military Structure	Military is based upon clan resources, the clan are the base for sending warriors and the clan men are warriors.	A standing army is maintained which is trained and receives a salary. Compartmentalization of state power with a monopoly on force independent of clan alliances
Economic base	Collective property or property based upon the estates owned by an assembly of a group of clans. Loose affiliation to the land.	Centralized revenue collection based upon the rules et by the state. The entire economy is segmented into trade taxes, production tax, harvest tax and state managed resources like iron ore, timber and water (at a later stage in the Mauryan times).

From the classification mentioned in the table we can clearly see the distinction between the *mahajanapada*s and their power and administrative structure. This difference was the important turning point in establishing the central state in the Indian subcontinent which is also called the first pan Indian empire — The Mauryan Empire. Analytically, all the conditions that are mentioned were slowly moving

[13] The highway functioned as a sweeping continental arc across the Indo-Gangetic plains, stretching from the northwestern frontier of the subcontinent down to the eastern sea side. It originated in the Gandhara mahajanapada at Takshila, a premier center of learning, commerce, and international exchange — connecting further west to Central Asia and the Achaemenid Empire via the Hindu Kush passes. Moving southeast, the route crossed the Punjab rivers and passed through major political nodes including Mathura (Surasena *mahajanapada*), Kanyakubja (Panchala), Ayodhya and Shravasti (Kosala), and Varanasi (Kashi). The Eastern Section- It continued eastward to the rising imperial capital of Pataliputra and Rajagriha (Magadha *mahajanapada*) before terminating at the riverine-maritime port of Tamralipti (in modern West Bengal) on the Bay of Bengal.

[14] An ideal type is not a moral 'ideal' or an average of reality; rather, it is an analytically constructed model, which is used as a tool, emphasizing specific, logically consistent features of a phenomenon to serve as a comparative baseline.

towards making the monarchies more stable over a period of time as compared to the republics. The monarchial administrative set up was rigorous and able to separate the human factor of emotional denial or discontent from the state apparatus. The republics were highly equal but susceptible to the outside influence as the clans were independent and acted as an individual within themselves. It was possible to alter the individual's feelings and sow the seeds of doubt and dissension while the monarchy represented a system operating at various levels and even if one level was not functioning or going against the state's wish it was easy to identify and neutralize which led to a successful implementation of state policy, while in the republics it depended upon how the calls perceived it and how their decision making is influenced in real time by the external or internal factors. As seen from the historical reference of Ajatshatru's plan to send his minister Vassakara to the Vajji republic for three years and the ground work that he did to break the understanding and unity of different clans of republic led, ultimately, to the ruin of Vajji and the rise of Magadha [Mahāparinibbāna Sutta DN 16.1.1–5; Walshe, 1995, pp. 231–277].

The Legal Underpinnings of the State in Mahajanapadas and Beyond

The transition of *jana* to *janapada* and *mahajanapada* was complete in the sense of state formation with every major parameter of institutional state power being fulfilled. The ancient Indian texts discuss with great vigour and details, the situation of law and jurisprudence and how the *mahajanapada* and the empires after them dealt with the subject of legality. The era of city states marks the formation of law and its grammar, the jurisprudence, in the Indian subcontinent. During this period, as we saw in the ideal type comparison between the state systems of *gana sangha* (republics) and monarchies, the monarchy system characterized by a centralized administration led to more stable and long lasting political and economic systems.

The law as an instrument was not understood as an abstract creation based upon procedures but it was defined by moral and righteous duties of the king and the population alike, such a conception was based upon the maintenance of cosmic, moral and social order in all aspects of social and political life. The king was not a sovereign lawmaker but supreme guardian of *dharma* (righteousness)[15] [Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 8.1–11.1].

There is also another important detail about the laws in the *mahajanapada* period that the king was free to establish rock edicts (*rajasasana*) but the application and validity of these decrees was dependent upon their alignment with the sacred traditions [Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 8.1–11.1][16] and local customary laws (*acara*) [Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 8.1–11.1][17]. The single most effective and legitimate form of state power which was wielded by both the monarchy and the republic forms of government in the *mahajanapada* period was the use of force and an effective monopoly over it. The concept of *dandaniti*[18] was enshrined in the state's understanding of its functions and duties. It was, by default, understood as the prerogative of the king to ascertain justice to prevent chaos and anarchy.

[15] The concept of the king as the guardian of supreme *dharma* — frequently translated in Sanskrit as *dharmasya gopta* — finds its first prominent and definitive articulation in the Dharmasutras, specifically within the Gautama Dharmasutra, which is widely recognized as the oldest surviving legal treatise of this era, established that the king was not the creator of the law, but rather its sacred executor. The text defines the king's ultimate responsibility as maintaining social order (varna) and moral righteousness (dharma). Under this framework, the king is bound by the supreme law of dharma and acts strictly as its guardian, utilizing state enforcement or punishment (danda) to protect his subjects and ensure that every individual fulfills their duties.

[16] Gautama 11.19 explicitly dictates that the king's administration of justice must be guided by the Veda, the dharmashastras (tradition/Smriti), the angas (auxiliary sciences), and the purānas.

[17] Gautama 11.20 expands this authority by giving legal validity to regional, caste, and occupational group customs: The laws of countries, Varnas, and families, which are not opposed to the (sacred) records, have also authority.

[18] For the king's duties, training, and the constitutional role of sovereign enforcement, [Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 11.1–11.32]. For the concrete application of judicial punishment (*danḍa*) under the legal system. [Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 12.1–12.47]

The legal reach of the state was not limited to the social and political life but extensively covered the fiscal resources and the means of production that is agriculture. The revenue laws were codified because the surplus was one of the founding factors in the processes of state formation and consolidation and hence, the legal relation witnessed a shift between the sovereign and the subjects, the concept of *bali*[19] was transformed to the concept of *bhaga* [Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 10.24–10.27][20]. The king was also made the legal owner of the entire land within the state by specific laws coded for the purpose Pranashta[21][Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 10.36–10.38].

Table 2. Depicting the two trajectories of legal systems in the mahajanapadas

LEGAL SYSTEMS	MONARCHY	GANA SANGHA (REPUBLIC)
Judicial Administration	Judicial power was concentrated with king as the highest court of appeal.	Judicial power was based in assembly and was highly clan based.
Differentiated structures for law Adjudication with central oversight	Different branches had different laws, guilds could make laws or village councils the royal courts backed them with state coercive power.	Multi-tiered judicial hierarchy, extremely favourable to a just outcome, no branch of the society had overwhelming judicial powers.
Penal Provisions	Penal system varied depending upon who committed what offence.	For punishment the guilty must be declared such by all the levels of judicial hierarchy. Punishment was based upon the clan specific rulebook – *pavenibusthaka*

The Organic view of the State: Structural Functional Foundations

The central pillar of the state power was an all present and functional core, rooted in the philosophy of state. The state was not imagined to be a simple mechanistic model which is composed of parts which are collateral and can be replaced. The state was, as opposed to a non-living entity model, understood as a living entity which was understood to be composed of parts acting and existing in complementary roles to and with each other. The structure of the state was defined by the Saptanga theory[22] which treated state as an organic entity. The foundation of the state by imagining it to be living entity goes back to the philosophical routes of the ancient Indian thought which viewed people as an intrinsic part of the system rather than constituent units, separate from the state.

In his seminal and authoritative work, 'Arthashastra', Kautilya describes the seven parts of the state, namely: *Swami* (ruler/ the head) *Amatya* (minister/ eyes), *Janapada* (territory/ thighs), *Durg* (the fortified capital/ arms), *Kosha* (treasury/ mouth), *Danda/Bala* (the force, army/ mind), *Mitra* (allies/

[19] The history of *bali* is a story of evolution. In the earlier Vedic period, *bali* was a voluntary, customary offering or religious tribute brought by clansmen to their tribal chief (*rajan*). However, by the *mahajanapada* period, *bali* became a mandatory tax. While *bhāga* was a precise, predictable share of the harvest, *bali* functioned more like an additional cess, levy, or tribute. It was often collected as a lump-sum payment from an entire village rather than an assessment of individual plots.

[20] *Bhāga* literally translates as 'share' or 'portion.' During the *mahajanapada* era, it represented the regular, compulsory land revenue or agricultural tax paid by the cultivator to the king. The tax was assessed as a fixed proportion of the actual agricultural produce harvested from the land. In the dharmasutras, the standard rate is explicitly stated as 1/6th of the crop yield. Depending on the quality of the soil and water access, this could occasionally fluctuate to 1/8th or 1/10th.

[21] Under Gautama's law, when a piece of property or an area of land became praṇaṣṭa (lost or abandoned by its owner), the king was legally obligated to take custody of it and advertise it publicly. The king held it in trust for a specific statutory period — traditionally one year. (Gautama Dharmasutra, 1999, 10.36–10.38)

[22] The *Saptāṅga* theory (the doctrine of the seven limbs of the state) is the cornerstone of ancient Indian organic polity. It conceptualizes the state not as a mere mechanical contract or an arbitrary imposition of force, but as a living, integrated organism. Just as the human body requires all its vital organs to function harmoniously, the state requires seven interconnected elements to maintain political sovereignty, security, and righteousness (dharma). For Reference: https://www.finsindia.org/good-governance-in-indian-statecraft-diplomacy-and-polity-through-prism-of-ancient-indian-literature.html. [дата обращения: 29. 05. 2026].

ear)[23][Kautilya, 1972, p. 367]. This illustration of the parts of state and comparison to the parts of the body made it possible to understand how importance was given to each part of the state depending upon its usage and role in the daily administration, defence and upkeep of the state.

The brilliance of Kautilya was that he just did not explain the concept of the state as an organic entity but also associated it with the geopolitical realities via his Mandala theory[24] [Kautilya, 1972, pp. 368–369] and assimilated it in such a manner that it finds relevance even to this day. It was a pure theory based upon the internal structure and functions of the state and how these functions calibrated themselves when dealing with the outside world. In Kautilya's imagination the sovereign and his functions were of paramount importance because if the sovereign is of sound mind and capable he can cure the ailing parts of the state and if need be, can overhaul them for efficiency but a corrupt and inefficient sovereign will lead to the demise of even the best functioning state.

Though Kautilya was the heavy lifter of the *mandala* theory and establisher of the first realistic understanding of the then global geopolitics and explaining the anarchic nature of the system in which the states dealt with each other, he was the not the only one. Prominent mentions of the theory of *mandala* and interstate relations have been found in the 'Shanti Parva' of the 'Mahabharata'[25]. While Kautilya focuses on pragmatic functionality, the 'Shanti Parva' emphasizes absolute interdependence. *Bhishma* remarks that no single element can be judged as inherently superior to another in isolation. At any given moment, the limb that is critical to executing the immediate requirement of the state is the supreme limb [Mahabharata, 2000, pp. 57–69]. Several Indian scriptures gave treatises on the organic view of the state and its constituents and how the state plays out in the relay of interstate interactions and how it ought to. While Kautilya provides highly analytical metrics to attain excellence for each part of the state and establishes and operational hierarchy, the 'Shanti Parva' of 'Mahabharata' stresses on absolute moral interdependence. It gives a moral understanding of the state by envisioning it as an organic entity and functioning within the domains of the *rajadharma* (righteous rule) and its preservation.

Conclusion

The evolution of pristine state systems within the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and its expanding peripheries represents a watershed event in early Indian history. Far from being a sudden imposition of imperial autocracy from the top, the gradual transition from the pastoral, lineage-based societies of the Vedic *jana* to the territorially defined institutional frameworks of the *janapada*s and *mahajanapada*s was an organic, highly diffused and uneven process. It was a transformation rooted deeply in ecological advantages, agrarian surpluses, and the sophisticated dynamics of peer polity interaction. By exploring the spatial realities of the Doab alongside the rich availability of ancient philosophical, moral and analytical texts, this article has sought to reframe the ancient Indian city-state not as an isolated municipal anomaly,

[23] '*svāmya-mātya-janapada-durga-kośa-daṇḍa-mitrāṇi prakṛtayaḥ*'
The king, the minister, the country, the fortified city, the treasury, the army, and the ally are the constituents of the state. [Kautilya, 1972, 6.1.1]

[24] The Mandala theory (Rājamaṇḍala) formulated by Kautilya in the 'Arthashastra' is one of the most sophisticated frameworks of classical geopolitics. The word 'mandala' literally means circle, and in this context, it represents a dynamic circle of states or geopolitical zones surrounding a central kingdom. At its core, the theory is a highly realistic, rational analysis of interstate diplomacy and foreign policy. It is built on a fundamental structural premise: your neighbor is your natural enemy, and your neighbor's neighbor is your natural friend [Kautilya 6.2.1–40, 7.1.1–19].

[25] ' *ātmā mātyāśca kośaśca daṇḍo mitrāṇi caiva hi,*
rāṣṭraṁ durgaṁ ca pañcaiva saptakaṁ rājyamucyate.'
The self/king, the ministers, the treasury, the army, the allies, the territory, and the fort; these seven together are declared to constitute the kingdom. [Mahabhārata, 2000, 12.69.64].

but as the primary point of a complex, bifurcated political evolution that yielded both resilient *gaṇa-saṅghas* (republics) and highly centralized *rājyas* (monarchies).

Geographically, the Ganga-Yamuna Doab served as the indispensable ecological engine for this secondary urbanization and subsequent pristine state formation. The dense alluvial networks of the major river valleys provided the material baseline — manifested in steady agricultural surpluses and the mastery of iron technology — that allowed localized kin-groups to transform into permanent territorial polities. However, as this study has demonstrated through the lens of peer polity interaction, these city-states did not develop in structural vacuums. Instead, the intense horizontal competition, institutional emulation, symbolic warfare, and commercial exchange between neighboring *janapada*s accelerated the pace of political specialization. The constant friction and fluid diplomatic alignments within the Doab created a geopolitical pressure cooker, forcing early states to codify their administrative structures, formalize their fiscal apparatuses, and establish permanent standing militaries to survive. This structural clarity is most vividly preserved in the legal and philosophical underpinnings found across early Indian texts.

The normative and pragmatic dimensions of ancient Indian statecraft — articulated through the Dharmasutras, 'Arthashastra', 'Manusmriti', and the 'Shanti Parva' of the 'Mahabharata'—reveal a highly sophisticated conceptualization of political sovereignty. Central to this jurisprudential framework was the doctrine of the *Saptanga*, which conceptualized the state as a living, organic entity composed of seven interdependent limbs (*praktitis*). By defining the state through this holistic model, ancient theorists recognized that political survival depended on the structural harmony between the sovereign, the administrative apparatus, the geo-economic resource base, defensive infrastructure), the fiscal treasury, coercive military power, and external diplomatic networks. Crucially, this textual tradition underscores that early Indian kingship was explicitly constitutional rather than arbitrarily despotic.

As established from the earliest Dharmasūtras through to the 'Manusmṛti', the king was never envisioned as the creator of law, but strictly as the *dharmasya gopta* — the sacred guardian of supreme dharma. His legitimate right to rule, execute punitive justice, and collect structural revenues like *bhaga* (the agricultural sixth share) and *bali* was contractually bound to his capacity to provide protection (*rakṣaṇa*) and maintain social equilibrium. When Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' later put forward these principles with a rigorous realistic application, or when Bhishma in the 'Shanti Parva' emphasized the situational, absolute interdependence of the state's limbs, they were articulating a mature philosophy of governance where political authority was permanently anchored in structural -functionality, moral righteousness, and the mitigation of socio-political anarchy (*matsyanyāya*).

Concurrently, the political landscape of the *mahajanapada* period offers a brilliant study in institutional divergence, characterized by the co-existence and fierce rivalry between monarchies and republics. The *gana-sanghas* represented an alternative, highly sophisticated trajectory of state formation. By relying on assembly-based, deliberative decision-making bodies and corporate aristocratic leadership, these republics challenged the singular centrality of the *svami*, demonstrating that complex, urbanized city-states could thrive through collective sovereignty. While the structurally centralized, fiscally aggressive monarchies of the southern Doab — such as Magadha and Kosala — ultimately used their geo-strategic positions and Kautilyan realism to absorb these oligarchic polities into larger imperial formations, the legacy of the republics remains a powerful testament to the institutional plurality of early Indian political thought.

Ultimately, the Indian city-states of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and beyond were not transient, accidental experiments in urban concentration. They were the crucible in which the fundamental concepts of Indian statehood, law, territorial sovereignty, and fiscal administration were forged. By looking at this period through both the material realities of spatial geography and the conceptual frameworks of early legal treatises, we move past outmoded Eurocentric binaries regarding oriental governance. Instead, we uncover

a dynamic historical landscape where pristine state evolution was driven by a sophisticated reasoning between environmental opportunity, competitive peer polity networks, and an enduring intellectual commitment to balancing political survival with supreme moral order.

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