A Retrospective note on Urbanization in India during Early Historical Period

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The period under study was marked by a rapid growth of cities, and it is no wonder that Indian sources give so much attention to the status and regulation of all aspects of urban life. The administration of cities is the subject of special chapter in the Arthasastra (11.36)–'Rules for the City Superintendent'–and other parts of the treatise. A fairly detailed description of the patterns of urban life has been given in the works of writers who followed Megasthenes. His evidence relates mostly to the capital of the empire, Pataliputra, where he lived as an ambassador. Some data can be extracted from Asoka's inscriptions, which not only mention cities and town (Pataliputra, Taxila, Ujjayini, Isila, Suvaroagiri, Tosali, Samapa, and Kausambi), but also provide evidence on their location.

In all likelihood, the report that the guardians of the law in a city or town were astynomi, who were grouped into six bodies of five persons each, stems from Megasthenes : "The members of the first look after everything relating to the industrial arts. Those of the second attend to the entertainment of foreigners. To these they assign lodgings, and they keep watch over their mode of life by means of those persons whom they assign to them as assistants. These assistants escort them on the way when they leave the country, or, in the event of their dying, forward their property to their relatives. They take care of them when they are sick, and, if they die, bury them, The third body consists of those who inquire when and how births and deaths occur, with the object not only of levying a tax, but also in order that births and deaths among both high and low should not escape the cognizance of the Government. The fourth class superintends trade and commerce. Its members have charge of weights and measures, and see that the products in their season are sold by public notice. No one is allowed to deal in more than one kind of commodity unless he pays a double tax. The fifth class supervises manufactured articles, which they sell by public notice. What is now is sold separately from what is old and there is a fine for mixing the two together. The sixth and last class consists of those who collect a tenth of the price of the articles sold. Fraud in the payment of this tax is punished by death. Such are the functions which these bodies separately discharge. In their collective capacity they have charge both of their special departments, and also of matters affecting the general interest, such as the keeping of public buildings in proper repair, the regulation of prices, the care of markets, harbours and temples" (Strabo, XV. 1.51).

This report about the existence of collective municipal bodies responsible for the city life finds no exact analogies in ancient Indian sources, but is to some extent confirmed by the data of the Arthasastra. There

we read about the division of the city into four parts, each headed by a sthanika – an official subordinated to the chief city official – the nagarika. sthanikas, superintendents and gopas, who supervised 10 to 20 or 40 families of city residents,. It is possible that the bodies described by Megasthenes bear a relation to the municipal administration system described in the Arthasastra (II.36). The Seleucid ambassador could have taken for a "class" the four officials administering one part of the city, and their head. 183 B.C.J. Timmer suggests that Megasthenes has dentified as a "class" of five men a group of officials having different ranks but working as one agency. 184

Cities had different kinds of functions and identities, as centres of political control, craft production, or trade; some combined all these. The foundations of this urbanization – the second phase in the north – were laid in the earlier centuries, with the establishment of a firm agricultural base that ensured sustained food surpluses. Settlements grew in population, number, and size. Increasing craft specialization, trade, and the beginning of the use of money led to higher degress of social complexity. Political leadership lent an important element of central direction and control.

The Pali canon refers to different kinds of urban settlements. Pura meant a town or city, often associated with fortifications. Nagara was a fortress or town. Nigama refered to a market town, midway between a gama and nagara in terms of size and social complexity, and was frequently associated with commercial activities. Rajadhani was a capital city. Nagaraha was a small town, mahanagara a big city. Champa, Rajagriha, Shravasti, Saketa, Kaushambi, and Varansi were mahanagaras. The texts often refer to the walls, gates, and watchtowers of cities and the hustle and bustle of urban life.

The two great cities of the north – wesrt – Charsada and Taxila – were strategically located at points where the trade routes crossed the Hindu Kush. Apart from the Khyber pass, there were other routes, such as the one running along the Kabul valley. An important route linked Taxila to Kashmir, and further on, to central Asia. In the 5th century BCE, a part of the north-west came under the sway of the Achaemenids and was subsequently brushed past by Alexander. Charsada represents the ancient city of Pushkalavati. Legend describes it as having been founded by Pushkara, son of Bharata, the brother of Rama. It is mentioned as Peucelaotis and Proclais in classical accounts. Arrian states that the people of the city revolted against Alexander and that a Macedonian garrison was placed here after Hephaestion subdued the revolt. Excavations at the mound of Bala Hisar at Charsada indicate occupation beginning in c. 600 BCE. By the early 4th century BCE, the city was protected by a ditch and mud rampart.

Ancient Takshashila (Taxila) was an important city, connected to the overland routes into Afghanistan and central Asia and to the maritime routes of the Arabian Sea via the Indus. According to epic tradition,

this was the place where king Janamejaya performed his great naga-yajna (snake sacrifice). The city is also mentioned in Buddhist, Jaina, and Greek accounts. Extensive excavations at Taxila revealed three major settlements at the Bhir mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh. The Bhir mound represents the site of the oldest city, with occupational levels belonging to the $6^{th}/5^{th}$ century BCE up to the 2nd century BCE.

Excavations at the Purana Qila (associated in local tradition with Indraprastha of the Mahabharata) in Delhi revealed NBPW levels belonging to the $4^{th}-3^{rd}$ centuries BCE. People lived in houses of mud-brick and burnt brick. In the upper Ganga valley, Hastinapura in Meerut district is an important site for which there is a full, published report. In epic-Puranic tradition, the Kuru capital was located at Hastinapura until a flood led to its being shifted to Kaushambi. Mathura was an important city of early historical India. The Mahabharata and the Puranas associate it with the Yadava clan, which included the Vrishnis, among whom Krishna was born. This city was situated at the entrance of the fertile Ganga plains, at the junction of the northern trade route and the one going southwards into Malwa, and on to the western coast.

The site of Kampilya, capital of south Panchala, has been identified with Kampil in Farukhabad district (UP). Small-scale excavations here indicated occupation from the PGW phase onwards. Ahichchhatra in Barelly district also has NBPW level, but most of the details of structures relate to the post-2nd century BCE period.

Rajghat, to the north-east of Benaras, is identified as the site of ancient Varanasi. This city was famed for its fine textiles and was an important point on the northern trade routes. The site shows a five–or six-fold cultural sequence. The site of ancient Shravasti, capital of Kosala, has been identified with the ruins at Saheth and Maheth, on the boundary of Gonda and Bahreich districts (UP). This city too was an important point on the northern trade routes. Maheth represents the city nd Saheth the site of the ancient monastery of Jetavana.

The discoveries at the adjacent sites of Ganwaria and Piprahwa in Basti district (north UP), excavated by an Archaeological Survey of India team led by K.M. Srivastava, should settle the long-standing debate about the location of ancient Kapilavastu. A large number of sealings and a pot lid bearing the name of the Kapilavastu monastery were found in excavations at Piprahwa. Apart from the ruins of monasteries and shrines, remains of what may represent the original stupa built by the Sakyas over the relics of the Buddha have also been identified. Ganwaria represents the town of Kapilavastu.

The ruins in and around the village of Basarh in Muzaffarpur district of Bihar have been identified with ancient Vaishali, capital of the Lichchhavis and the Vajji confederacy. Vaishali lay along the route from Magadha into the Nepal terai. Buddhist texts have a great deal to say about this city, Jaina tradition describes it as the birthplace of Mahavira, and Puranic tradition connects it with a legendary king named Visala. The mound known as Raja Visal ka Garh shows traces of old fortifications, and a tank known as Khorana Pokhar may represent the coronation tank of the Lichchhavis. Many antiquities and structural remains were found here, some of which may go back to the 5th/4th century BCE. A mud stupa, later encased in brick, was located to the north-west of the tank. It is possible that its mud core represents the stupa build by the Lichchhavis over the Buddha's relics.

Rajgir, about 40 miles south-east of Patna, is the site of ancient Rajagriha, the first capital of Magadha. An important trade route from Paithan to the middle Ganga valley terminated here. The city was closely associated with the lives of both the Buddha and Mahavira. Archaeological explorations at Rajgir mainly concentrated on identifying places mentioned in Buddhist texts and Xuanzang's account. Ancient Champa, capital of Anga, has been identified wih Champanagar and Champapur villages, 5 km west of Bhagalpur in south Bihar. In the NBPW phase, the site was surrounded by defensive fortifications, surrounded by a moat.

Apart from the literary and archaeological profiles of individual sites, important information is provided by settlement studies of certain areas, Erdosy's study (1988) of the Allahabad district (UP) corresponds to an area that would have fallen within the Vatsa kingdom. Erdosy initially dated Period II of the archaeological sequence here to c. 600-350 BCE. S. B. Singh's study (1979) of the Panchala area in the upper Ganga valley reveals a four-tier settlement structure, but does not distinguish between the early, middle, and late NBPW phases. Ahichchhatra, capital of Panchala, was the largest site. By the 3rd century BCE, it was a huge fortified city, measuring about 180 ha. Atranjikhera was a fortified secondary centre, about 64 ha in size, with evidence of a diverse agriculture base, craft activity, and trade. Jakhera was 8 ha, while the rest of the sites were villages less than 4 ha.

Ujjayini (modern Ujjain), on the banks of the Sipra river, a tributary of the Chambal, was the capital of Avanti. It was also a major commercial centre, a point from where routes from northern India bifurcated southwards and westwards. Four occupational phases have been identified at the site.

The remains of ancient Vidisha are located at Besnagar in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh. This was an important point on the trade routes that traversed the Malwa region. Although the rampart at this site

seems to have been built in the 2nd century BCE, the early NBPW phase shows BRW, iron objects, punch-marked coins, and ring wells.

In the Deccan, the kingdom of Ashmaka on the Godavari was one of the 16 mahajanapadas. Paithan (ancient Pratishthana), one of the most important early historical sites in this area, has not yet been properly explored. The beginning of the early historical occupation at Nasik goes back to c. 400 BCE. An important aspect of urbanism was the emergence of coinage. Pali text contain the first definite references to coins, e.g., rahapana, nikkha, ramsa, pada, masaka, and raranika. The literary evidence is corroborated by archaeological evidence of punch-marked coins from many sites, most of them made of silver. Pali texts contain many references to this profession, instruments of credit, people pawning their possessions, the occasional pledging of wife or children by debtors, and bankruptcy. Debtors were in fact debarred from joining the Buddhist sangha until they had paid their debts.

The term grihapati occurs in Vedic literature in the sense of the head of a household. The Pali texts tend to use terms such as gihi, gahattha, and ajjhavasati in this sense, and gahapati (the Pali form of grihapati) in a broader sense, Uma Chakravarti points out that apart from being the head of a household, the gahapati was also a wealthy property-owner and producer of wealth, associated especially with land and agriculture. Society is often described as consisting of three strata – Khattiya, Brahmana, and gahapati – associated with three different domains. According to the Anguttara Nikaya, the Khattiya aspires for power and territory, and dominion is his ideal; the Brahamana is associated with mantra and yanna (yajna), and brahmaloka is his ideal; the gahapati is associated with kamma (work) and sippa (craft), and the completion or fruit of work is his ideal. Threre are references to Brahmana gahapatis living in Brahmana villages. The gahapati's political importance is suggested in his inclusion among the seven treasures of the chakkavatti or ideal ruler of the world.

The setthi (this is the Pali form of Sanskrit sreshthin) of the Pali canon was a highlevel businessman, associated with trade and money-lending. There are many references to extremely wealthy setthis living in style in cities such as Rajagriha and Varansi.

The city was not only a certain type of settlement. It was also a political, social, and economic space. Literature is often eloquent about these aspects, but the idea of the city in various texts is by no means uniform. The city meant different things to writers of different regions and ages. It was sometimes presented as an idealized structuring of space, corresponding to notions of a moral or social order, one in which the king was central. Other texts underlined the socially heterogeneous nature of cities, suggesting that they were considered 'points of convergence'. It is possible to pluck out specific details about cities

from texts of this period. While many of the major cities mentioned in texts have been identified, some remain unidentified. It is interesting to note that archaeology confirms the importance of the great cities of literature. The details may not match, due to inadequate excavations, the lack of full published reports, and the embellishments of the literary tradition. Nevertheless, the profiles of early historical cities can be constructed by putting together the available literary and archaeological evidence. These cities were linked to each other through the trade routes of the time.

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