UNIT 2 URBAN SETTLEMENTS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to explain the:
- factors responsible for the rise of urban centres,
- various phases in the history of urbanism,
- criteria for identifying settlements as urban,
- general pattern of the post-Gupta urban growth,
- regional variations in urban settlements, and
- types of towns.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The study of urban settlements is an indispensable element in the understanding of socio-economic history of the post-Gupta centuries. It should be taken as a complementary component along with the agrarian economy. Recent writings have particularly focused on the role of urban settlements in the overall framework of Indian feudalism. This and the two subsequent Units make an attempt to review the problems associated with such developments.

2.2 FORM AND SUBSTANCE OF URBAN CENTRES

Study of urban centres is an important aspect of socio-economic history. Urban centres in early medieval India have generally been studied in two ways:

i) As a part of economic history i.e. history of trade, commerce and craft production, etc., and

ii) as a part of administrative or political history, i.e. as capitals, administrative centres, centres of major and minor ruling families and fort towns.

Hence the focus of urban studies has so far been mainly on types of urban centres. Accordingly towns or cities have been listed under various categories such as market, trade or commercial centres, ports, political and administrative centres, religious centres, etc. However, there has been no sufficient attempt to explain the causes behind the emergence of towns. In other words the form of an urban centre is studied but not its meaning or substance. In order to understand both the form and substance of urban centres, it is important to study their development.
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to study the processes of urban growth as a part of the broader socio-economic changes.

Phases and Definition

How do we define an urban centre and what are its essential traits; are some of the questions that we take up here. Prior to the coming of the Turks, the Indian sub-continent experienced at least three phases of urban growth:
1) During the bronze age Harappan civilization (fourth-second millennium B.C.),
2) Early historic urban centres of the iron age (c. sixth century B.C. to the end of the third century A.D.),
3) Early medieval towns and cities (c. eighth/ninth to twelfth centuries A.D.).

Amongst the earliest attempts to define an urban centre one can easily mention Gordon Childe's notion of "Urban Revolution". He listed monumental buildings, large settlements with dense population, existence of such people who were not engaged in food production (rulers, artisans and merchants) and cultivation of art, science and writing as prominent features to identify an urban centre. Further, Childe laid great stress on the presence of craft specialists and the role of agricultural surplus which supported non-food producers living in cities. Not all these traits, which were spelt out in the context of bronze age cities, are to be seen in the towns of iron age. There has been no dearth of urban centres with sparse population and mud houses.

Though agrarian surplus collected from rural areas is almost indispensable for the existence of a town, merely a settlement of non-agriculturists cannot be regarded as an urban centre. Early medieval literary texts refer to towns inhabited by people of all classes surrounded by a wall and moat and marked by the prevalence of the laws and customs of the guilds of artisans and merchants. A recent study based on excavated data from 140 sites spread over the entire Indian sub-continent (R.S. Sharma, Urban Decay in India, c.A.D.300-1000) focusses on:

- Quality of material life and the nature of occupations, and
- need to study urban centres not as parasites thriving on agricultural surplus but as centres integrally linked with rural hinterland.

Accordingly, some prominent traits of urban centres which can be applied to early medieval settlements as well, are identified as:

i) Size of a settlement in terms of area and population.

ii) Proximity to water resources—river banks, tanks, ring wells, etc.

iii) Presence or absence of artefacts representing activities of artisans, e.g. axes, chisels, plough-shares, sickles, hoes, crucibles, ovens, furnaces, dyeing vats, moulds for beads, seals, sealings, jewellery, terracotta, etc.

iv) Evidence of coin moulds signifying mint towns. The discovery of metallic money, when listed with the presence of artisans and merchants, certainly lends a clear urban character to such sites.

v) Presence or otherwise of luxury goods such as precious and semi-precious stones, glassware, ivory objects, fine pottery etc. The possibility is not ruled out that luxuries of ancient towns might become necessities for superior rural classes of early medieval times.

vi) Considering the moist, rainy climate of many alluvial plains such as the middle Ganga plain, baked brick (not just burnt bricks) structures on a good scale assume special importance. Though in Central Asia towns consisting of mud structures are also not unknown.

vii) Streets, shops, drains and fortifications also give a good idea of the nature of the urban settlement. At several places in the Deccan and elsewhere silos and granaries occur at historical sites, like at Dhusikatt in Andhra Pradesh. Apparently such structures were meant to store surplus foodgrains for feeding...
Check Your Progress 1

1) List the three main phases of urban growth in India prior to the coming of the Turks.

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2) What are the important features of a town spelt by Gordon Childe?

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3) List the important traits of urban centres applicable to early medieval India.

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2.3 THE GENERAL PATTERN

The post-Gupta centuries witnessed a new socio-economic formation based on the system of land grants. The gradual expansion of cultivation and agrarian economy through land grants (for details, see Unit 1) had an impact on the growth of towns and cities between the eighth and twelfth centuries. Though the overall picture of the Indian sub-continent is that of revival of urban centres, there are some regional variations as well. Such variations are seen in the nature, category and hierarchy of such centres due to operative economic forces, ecological and cultural differences and the nature of political organisation. Regional studies of urban centres are, therefore, essential for providing the correct perspectives. Such studies are available only for a few regions like Rajasthan, Central India and South India.

2.4 REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND TYPES

In a vast country like India there are a lot of regional variations in the pattern of emergence and growth of urban centres. In this section we will discuss some important variations.

2.4.1 Rural Centres Transformed into Urban Centres

The brahmadeyas and devadanas which are seen as important sources of agrarian expansion of the early medieval period, also provided the nuclei of urban growth. The Brahmana and temple settlements clustered together in certain key areas of agricultural production. Such centres, initially rural, became points of convergence for trade in a variety of commodities, manufacture of standardized goods, and exchange of goods. The availability of goods such as cloth, spices, and other luxury items facilitated the growth of urban centres.
Examples of such centres of urban growth are datable from the eighth and ninth centuries and are more commonly found in South India. The Cola city of Kumbakonam (Kudamukku-Palaiyarai) developed out of agrarian clusters and became a multi-temple urban centre between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Kanchipuram is a second major example of such an urban complex. While Kumbakonam's political importance as a residential capital of the Colas was an additional factor in its growth, Kanchipuram too had the additional importance of being the largest craft centre (textile manufacturing) in South India.

2.4.2 Market Centres, Trade-Network and Itinerant Trade

Early medieval centuries also witnessed the emergence of urban centres of relatively modest dimensions, as market centres, trade centres (fairs, etc.) which were primarily points of the exchange network. The range of interaction of such centres varied from small agrarian hinterlands to regional commercial hinterlands. Some also functioned beyond their regional frontiers. However, by and large, the early medieval urban centres were rooted in their regional contexts. This is best illustrated by the nagaram of South India, substantial evidence of which comes from Tamil Nadu and also to a limited extent by the existence of nakara and nagaramu in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh respectively. The nagaram served as the market for the nadu or kurram, an agrarian or peasant region. Some of them emerged due to the exchange needs of the nadu. A fairly large number of such centres were founded by ruling families or were established by royal sanction and were named after the rulers, a feature common to all regions in South India. Such centres had the suffix pura or pattana.

Nagarams located on important trade routes and at the points of intersection developed into more important trade and commercial centres of the region. They were ultimately brought into a network of intra-regional and inter-regional trade as well as overseas trade through the itinerant merchant organisations and the royal ports. Such a development occurred uniformly throughout peninsular India between the tenth and twelfth centuries. During these centuries South India was drawn into the wider trade network in which all the countries of South Asia, South-east Asia and China and the Arab countries came to be involved (See also Units 3 and 4). The nagarams linked the ports with political and administrative centres and craft centres in the interior.

In Karnataka nagarams emerged more as points of exchange in trading network than as regular markets for agrarian regions. However, the uniform features in all such nagarams is that they acquired a basic agricultural hinterland for the non-producing urban groups living in such centres. Markets in these centres were controlled by the nagaram assembly headed by a chief merchant called pattanasvami.

A similar development of trade and market centres can be seen in Rajasthan and western parts of Madhya Pradesh. Here, the exchange centres were located in the context of the bases of agrarian production i.e. where clusters of rural settlements occur. In Rajasthan these centres were points of intersection for traffic of varying origins, giving rise to a certain measure of hierarchy. The network was further elaborated with the growth of generations of well-known merchant families in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They are named after their places of origin such as Osawala (Osia), Shrimalis (Bhinimal), Pallivalas and Khandelvalas, etc. The resource bases, the main routes for the flow of resources and the centres of exchange were integrated through the expansion of these merchant families. Rajasthan provided the main commercial links between Gujarat, Central India and the Ganga valley. Such links were maintained through towns like Pali, which connected the sea coast towns like Dvaraka and Bhrigukachcha (Broach) with Central and North India. Gujarat, with its dominant Jain merchants, continued to be the major trading region of Western India where early historic ports or emporium like Bhrigukachcha (Broach) continued to flourish as entrepots of trade in early medieval times. Bayana, another notable town in Rajasthan was the junction of different routes from different directions. The range of merchandise started probably with agricultural produce (including dairy products) but extended to such high-value items as horses, elephants, horned animals and jewels.

In Karnataka, the steady increase in towns during the period under review is marked
Shimoga. In the trade with the West i.e. Arabia, Persian Gulf and beyond, the West Coast of Peninsular India played a consistently dominant role from the early historic period. Several ports such as Thana, Goa, Bhatkal, Karwar, Honavar and Mangalore developed during the revival of long distance trade, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, with evidence of coastal shipping and ocean navigation. Surprisingly, this commercial activity was taking place (see also Unit 3) only through limited monetization. Incidentally, the Konkan coast (under the Shilaharas) does not even show any signs of rise of markets and their network.

Wider trade networks also existed between Karnataka, Andhra and Tamil Nadu, for the presence of Kannada, Tamil and Telugu merchants is well attested in several towns such as Belgaun (Karnataka), Peruru in Nalgonda district (Andhra Pradesh) and coastal towns of Visakhapatnam and Ghantasala. The Andhra coast turned to the south eastern trade with Motupalli, Visakhapatnam and Ghantasala acting as the major outlets. Market centres of inter-regional importance are represented by places like Nellore, Draksharama, Tripurantakam and Anumakonda in Andhra Pradesh. On the northern and southern banks of Kaveri in its middle reaches arose a number of exchange points between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu such as Talakkad and Mudikondan.

Kerala developed contracts with the West and foreign traders such as the Jews, Christians and Arabs who were given trading towns under special royal charters. Coastal towns such as Kolikkodu, Kollam etc., became entrepots of South Asian trade. The location of such trading groups as the Anuvannan and Arab horse dealers enhanced the importance of coastal towns in Karnataka and Kerala.

Major craft centres which developed in response to inter-regional trade were weaving centres in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Some of the craft and commercial centres of the early historic urban phase survived till the early medieval period and were brought into the processes of re-urbanisation which linked them with the new socio-economic institutions like the temple. Kashi (Varanasi) in the north and Kanchipuram (near Madras) in the south are two very prominent examples of such processes.

2.4.3 Sacred/Pilgrimage Centres

The idea of pilgrimage to religious centres developed in the early medieval period due to the spread of the cult of Bhakti. Its expansion in different regions through a process of acculturation and interaction between the Brahmanical or Sanskritic forms of worship and folk or popular cults cut across narrow sectarian interests. As a result, some local cult centres of great antiquity as well as those with early associations with brahmanical and non-brahmanical religions, became pilgrimage centres. The pilgrimage network was sometimes confined to the specific cultural region within which a cult centre assumed a sacred character. However, those cult centres, which became sacred tirthas attracted worshippers from various regions. Both types of pilgrimage centres developed urban features due to a mobile pilgrim population, trade and royal patronage. The role of emerging market in the growth of tirthas is now being recognised by historians in a big way.

Pushkara near Ajmer in Rajasthan was a sacred tirtha of regional importance with a dominant Vaishnava association. Kasi (Banaras) acquired a pan-Indian character due to its greater antiquity and importance as a brahmanical sacred centre. In South India, Srirangam (Vaishnava), Chidambaram (Shaiva) and Madurai (Shaiva) etc. developed as regional pilgrimage centres, while Kanchipuram became a part of an all India pilgrimage network. While Melkote was a regional sacred centre in Karnataka, Alampur, Draksharama and Simhachalam show a similar development in Andhra Pradesh. Tirupati was initially an important sacred centre for the Tamil Vaishnavas but acquired a pan-Indian character later in the Vijayanagara period.

Jain centres of pilgrimage emerged in Gujarat and Rajasthan where merchant and royal patronage led to the proliferation of Jain temples in groups in centres such as Osia, Mount Abu, Palitana, etc.

In South India the elaboration of temple structures in sacred centres show two types of urban growth:
First, it was organised around a single large temple as in Srirangam, Madurai, Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu), Melkote (Karnataka), Draksharama and Simhachalam (Andhra Pradesh).

The second type involves the growth around several temples of different religions such as Shivaism, Vishnuism and Saktism.

The early medieval urbanisation is sometimes characterised as "temple urbanisation" particularly in the context of south India. Sacred centres also provided important links in the commerce of a region as temples and the mathas attached to them were the biggest consumers of luxury articles and value goods.

2.4.4 Royal Centres or Capitals

Royal centres of the seats of power of the ruling families were a major category of urban centres in early medieval India. Some of them had been the seats of royal power even in the early historic period, for example, in the Janapadas of North India or in the traditional polities of South India. Royal families also developed their own ports, which were the main ports of entry into their respective territories and which also linked them with international commerce. Thus, the commercial needs of royal centres created new trade and communication links and built up much closer relationships between the royal centre and their agricultural hinterlands or resource bases. In all the regions south of the Vindhyas, where brahmanical kingdoms came to be established by the eighth century A.D. there is substantial evidence of the growth of such royal centres. Some representative examples are:

- Vatapi and Vengi of the Chalukyas in the northern Karnataka and Andhra.
- Kanchipuram of the Pallavas with their royal port at Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram).
- Madurai of the Pandyas with Korkai as their port.
- Tanjavur of the Colas with Nagappattinam as their port.
- Kalyana of the Western Chalukyas, Dvarasamudra of the Hoysalas, and
- Warangal of the Kakatiyas with Motupalli at their port.

Warangal was a rare example of a fortified royal city in South India.

Examples of royal centres in North India are:

- the Gurjara Partihara capital at Kanyakubja (Kanauj).
- Khajuraho of the Cándellas.
- Dhara of the Paramaras, and
- Valabhi of the Solankis.

A fairly large number of cities emerged under the powerful Gurjara-Pratiharas, Chahamanas and Paramaras in Rajasthan. Most of them were fortified centres, hill forts (garhkila and durga). Examples of fort-cities in Rajasthan are:

- Nagara and Nagda under the Guhilas.
- Bayana, Hanumangarh and Chitor under the Gurjara-Pratiharas, and
- Mandor, Ranathambor, Sakambhari and Ajmer under the Chauhans and so on.

On the basis of various sources, a list of 131 places has been compiled for the Chauhan dominions, most of which seem to have been towns. Nearly two dozen towns are identified in Malwa under the Paramaras. Gujarat under the Chalukyas was studded with port towns. The number of towns, however, does not seem to be large in Eastern India although all the nine victory camps (jayaskandavars) of the Palas (Pataliputra, Mughagiri, Ramavati, Vata Parvataka, Vilaspora, Kapilavasaka, Sahasgand, Kanchanapura and Kanauj) may have been towns. To these may be added four capitals of the Senas in northern and eastern Bengal, viz. Lakhnauti, Balasore, Burdwan and Cooch Behar. For the early periods, the name of the town may not be definite but the siting of some of these centres is certain from textiles and seals.
in the Candellas records. The Palas and the Candellas also account for nearly twenty and twenty-four fortresses respectively.

Sometimes, important trade and market centres were also conferred on feudatory families. Examples of such minor political centres are numerous in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Check Your Progress 2

1) What led to the transformation of some rural centres into urban?

2) How did the trading activities help in the growth of towns?

3) Did religious centres play a role in the process of urbanisation?

4) Write five lines on “administrative centres as towns”.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

The changes introduced by the system of land grants in the post-Gupta centuries were not confined to a new agrarian economy. Urban settlements, which had been in the state of decay in the few centuries after the arrival of the Guptas, saw a new life infused into them. The revival of trade, rise of new markets, dispersal of political authority and consolidation of economic power by religious establishments had given rise to numerous towns and cities in different regions of the Indian sub-continent with only minor variations noticeable in the relative importance of causative factors.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Kurram: sometimes the same as nadu (see below) but sometimes only a part of a nadu.

Nadu: a district or a sub-division; also used in the sense of the local assembly to
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**Nagaram/Nakhara/Nagarama:** a sort of merchant assembly located in market towns with wide ranging commercial interests.

**Skandhavar:** military camps—functioning as mobile capitals.

**Tirtha:** sacred/pilgrimage centre.

### 2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) See Sec. 2.2 under the heading phrases and definition.

2) Your answer should include features like large settlements, dense population, large sections of people engaged in artisan crafts and commerce etc. See Sec. 2.2 also.

3) Seven such traits listed in Sec. 2.2. Please read them and write in brief five of them.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) In some cases the rural centres provided a nuclei for the growth of urban centres. At times rural centres became a point of convergence of trade and developed into towns. See Sub-sec. 2.4.1.

2) Your answer should include factors such as the location of place on a major trade route, interaction of route or market for regional trade or inter-regional trade of a port. See Sub-sec. 2.4.2.

3) A number of religious centres developed in towns because these were visited by a vast number of people and in due course markets etc. developed. Also read Sub-sec. 2.4.3 again.

4) You should write as to how administrative centres or seats of power developed in established towns. See Sub-sec. 2.4.4.