UNIT 3  APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL URBANISATION*

Structure

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Cities, as indicators of economic growth and social change, mean different things in different historical periods and regional contexts (Schultz, 1979: 15). Though the nomenclatures of ‘city’ and ‘town’ are used for all historical periods by many without much time-wise distinction, historians know for certain that the content of ‘city’ and ‘town’ changes over time. In other words urban centres are not static, on the other hand they keep on changing their meanings over time on the basis of changing larger socio-economic processes, within which they get shaped and formatted. In that sense they are microcosms which reflect the larger world. This type of perception made some to look at town or city to be a social form in which the essential properties of larger systems of social relations are grossly concentrated and intensified (Abrams, 1978: 9-10). The perception that cities are reflective of the larger socio-economic processes inherently prompts many to look at cities of medieval period as something significantly different from those of ancient period and also of modern period, where entirely different systems of social relations operated.

3.2 IDEA OF MEDIEVAL CITIES IN EUROPE

While arguing that cities are indicators of economic growth over time, historians and sociologists have also been trying to look into the nuanced nature of urban processes corresponding to it. Max Weber perceived the Western medieval cities to be centres of production in contrast to the ancient Greek or Roman cities, which were largely centres

* Prof. Pius Malekandathil, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This is a modified version of the ‘Introduction’ of the book, edited by Yogesh Sharma and Pius Malekandathil, (2014) Cities in Medieval India (New Delhi: Primus Books). We acknowledge with thanks Primus Books for letting us use the ‘Introduction’ from the above mentioned book.
of consumption. These medieval cities are said to have become the launching pad for the development of capitalism in the West, when they combined processes of production with those of exchange and also gave ‘political and cultural’ priority to the interests of ‘producers’ and ‘traders’, over and above those of the ‘consumers’ that had been the case during the ancient period in the West. Max Weber also refers to the types of social activities happening in the western medieval towns from the part of these ‘producers’ and ‘traders’ for ‘constituting or evading some form of power’. The urban dwellers of medieval West, constituted of the ‘producers’ and ‘traders’, broke their dependence on the legitimate feudal authorities around them and usurped power from them to resort to ‘non-legitimate domination’ by putting themselves illegitimately on artisans and peasants, who in turn were required to rely upon them. It was through rational associations and confraternities of burghers that the latter usurped power and there were cases when a private club of rich citizens claimed for their right to grant citizenship. The atmosphere of autonomy of the city that allowed rational economic action, free conduct of trade as well as pursuit of gain and protected the interests of ‘producers’ both in the domains of economy and power exercise was instrumental in the development of ‘work ethic’ in medieval western cities (Weber, 1966; Weber, 1968: 1212-1367; Wood, 2007: 158-173; Abrams, 1978: 28-30). Max Weber argued that what constituted an ideal full urban community was a settlement displaying relative pre-dominance of trade-commercial relations and having a fortification, a market, a court of its own and at least partially autonomous law, a related form of association and required amount of autonomy and autocephaly that allowed the burghers to participate in the election of authorities that governed them (Weber, 1966: 80-1; Weber, 1968: 1215-1231). This was an ideal typical construction, which was also excessively euro-centric.

The role of medieval cities in the process of transition from feudalism to capitalism has been a theme of vibrant academic debates for a long span of time and so has been the theme of formation of a working class in the cities as inevitable component of social evolution. Henry Pirenne argues for the primacy of medieval cities and long-distance trade as the engines of social change and views that with the commercial revival in western Europe from the eleventh century on, the country started orienting itself towards towns (Pirenne, 1956: 81-110). The initial arguments of Maurice Dobb that the rise of medieval towns and the growth of markets had exercised a disintegrating impact on the structure of feudalism and ‘prepared for the growth of forces that weakened and supplanted it’ (Dobb, 2007: 70-1) was modified by him later following a debate with Paul Sweezy, who questioned the externality of towns in relation to feudalism. In response, Maurice Dobb argued that the rise of medieval towns was a process internal to feudal system and highlighted the incapacity of feudal social relations ‘to contain the process of petty production and exchange that feudalism itself generated’ and showed this process to be a struggle of different groups within the feudal order to dominate small-scale production and to appropriate the profits of trade’ (Sweezy, 2006: 40; Dobb, 2007: 59–61). He perceived medieval towns as oases in a rather unfree society that acted as magnets of freedom for the pressurised and exploited rural population making them migrate to towns (Dobb, 2007: 70).

Historians realised that there were different types of medieval towns that emerged in the West and that they were not of the same economic and political value in effecting the transition from feudalism. Straightjacketing the medieval towns into one category has proved to be erroneous. Henri Pirenne identified two different categories of medieval towns: a) towns of Liege type and b) those of Flemish type. The Liege type of town was primarily political or seat of bishop or of his court, where the main people were ecclesiastical gentry, administrators with a few artisans and servants providing them with finished goods. The Flemish type of city was principally an economic unit, which
was ruled by a wealthy oligarchy consisting of rich merchant magnates and financial families. These towns took origin along the channels of long-distance trade and were located outside the old Roman settlements as well ecclesiastical townships and feudal fortifications. The inhabitants of such cities lived by trade making them evolve as the base for the new anti-feudal ruling class (Pirenne, 1956: 55-100, 124-44, 160).

Fernand Braudel says that there were three basic types of towns in the course of their evolution: a) open towns which were not differentiated from their hinterland and were at times blending into it, as were seen in ancient Greece and Rome. In the open towns, sizeable amount of power remained with the structures of an agrarian world.  b) The second type consisted of closed towns, which were self-sufficient units and ‘closed in on themselves in every sense’ and ‘the walls of these towns marked the boundaries of an individual way of life more than a territory’, as we see in the case of medieval towns. The moment a peasant fleeing from the seigniorial servitude crossed the ramparts of the medieval town and entered the walled space of the town, he got relieved of his servitude and became free and the seigniorial lord could not touch him. In closed towns there was a relative appropriation of power by those residing within the town. c) The third type consisted of the subject towns which were held in the gamut of subjection by prince and state, as in the case of early modern towns like Florence that the Medicis had subjugated or Paris that the Bourbon rulers kept as their capital. The closed towns or the mercantile towns were viewed as having caused the Western Europe to advance economically (Braudel, 1973: 401-6; Abrams, 1978: 24-5).

As one of the important markers by which a town is distinguished from the country side is the nature of division of labour, historians have been looking at the labour processes in medieval towns, as well. Though theoretically Fernand Braudel agrees that the merchants, the functions of political, religious and economic control and the craft activities would go over to the town side, he views that the complete span of these professions was seen only in big towns and not in small towns, where the manpower was limited (Abrams, 1978: 376). In fact the labour process of medieval towns was not so intense and complex as we find in the modern cities which rose with industrial capitalism. Moreover, unlike the medieval cities, the type of social trends that appeared with industrial capitalism necessitated the emergence of planned cities for modern period, with a fixed pattern of policing, street plans, earmarked spaces for stores, transport lines, labeled and segregated neighbourhoods, configurations of political power, specific rules related to hygiene and health care etc. The different forms of control that were exercised over the urban space after industrial capitalism may not be seen in medieval cities in the way they are found in modern towns.

Recently there have been attempts to look at medieval cities from the perspective of cultural formation and introduce urban identities and city-forms as cultural constructions, which were being recurringly refashioned and modified. The urban communities are studied vis-à-vis their cultural formation thanks to their participation in community movements, confrontations with alien cultures, formation of plural societies, dual or multiple loyalties and multiple affiliations.

Many historical geographers and historians argue that the spatial processes involved in the construction of the urban units can be analysed and studied to decode the intentions of the human agents and the extent of their realisations. Spatial studies got significant attention with the works of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja on the ‘production of space’ (Foucault, 1986: 22-27; Foucault, Wright and Rabinow, 1982: 14-20; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989). Historical geographers argue that spatial process is something that happens not by accident, but with definite purposes and logic. They view that “space”, particularly urban space, is intentionally charged with meaning
and show the ways how meanings of power and domination are inscribed into urban space (Harvey, 2001; Gregory, 2000: 644-646; Harvey, 1973; Harvey, 1985; Harvey, 2007). Spatialisation focuses on ‘space’ as a fundamental variable influencing both society’s organisation and operation as well as the behaviour of its individual members (Cox, 1976: 182-207). This type of study emerges from the assumption that man makes imprints on geography in the material process of existence by repeated modifications in the landscape and that by a historical study of landscape one can decipher the context of human activity and can trace the human thought behind it. Michel Foucault, who saw power as being inscribed in space, was convinced that analysis of power in society could be achieved through an analysis of control over space (Foucault, 1980: 76-77; Baker, 2003: 65). Historical geographers and historians now make a distinction between private and public spaces, sacred and profane spaces, commercial and ceremonial spaces, shared and divided spaces, male and female spaces and individual and institutional spaces and they realise that spaces are contested resources which individuals and groups seek to control as demonstration of their own power (Ploszajska, 1994: 413-429; Malekandathil, 2009: 13-38).

Sociologists and urban historians maintain that a study of the process of urbanisation has to focus on the variables of population, social organisation, the physical environment and technology. The process of urban modification begins when the changing social organisation and technological innovation mediate in the urban space in such a way that the balance between the population and the environment gets changed. The societal process emerging out of it causes various types of structures to appear in the urban space (Schultz, 1979: 15). Stanley K. Schultz says that for understanding the nuances of urbanisation process, one should analyse such aspects like size of population concentration, rural-urban-rural migration patterns, fertility-mortality ratios, rate of literacy etc., under the category of population and the type of geography chosen for habitation as well as the physical spacing and distance of communities within that geography should be examined to get a picture of the urban environment with which the urban dwellers are interacting. In order to understand the nature of mediation done by technology in urban space one should also analyse the nature of communication lines, modes of transportation as well as informational network and the nature of social organisation is better understood only when one examines the nature of the status and power groups within the urban communities, besides analysing the percentage of work force involved in non-agricultural enterprises, diversity of occupational structure, methods of recruitment for employment and nature as well as means of economic exchange etc (Schultz, 1979: 14-16).

### 3.3 PERCEPTIONS ON MEDIEVAL INDIAN CITIES

A vibrant academic debate on medieval Indian cities was initiated by Mohammed Habib with his argument on the sudden spurt of labour process in North India followed by an ‘urban revolution’ triggered off by the conquest of Mohammed Ghori. However he attributed the commencement of this labour process to an external factor, i.e., political conquest by Mohammed Ghori. He maintained that the low-caste Indian workers who till then remained outside the walls of towns and in the peripheries, entered the towns along with the forces of Mohammed Ghori, offering their services for government in the form of fighting force and for manufacturing sector to produce finished products. The new regime removed all kinds of discrimination against the city-workers, who in turn sustained it for more than 500 years. The religion of Islam acted as magnet attracting the city-workers like elephant-drivers, butchers, weavers etc., to get converted to it, as it gave them some sort of upward social mobility. Unlike during the time of Thakurs,
when military profession was hereditary and linked with land tenure, the new regime recruited fighting force out of the working class of the towns. The Turkish co-sharers of power drew their military force, workers for karkhanas, artisans, personal servants, musicians, dancing girls etc., from the large bulk of work force available in the towns. He views the conquest of India by Mohammed Ghori as a revolution of Indian city labour spearheaded by Ghorian Turks (Habib, 1952: 55-78).

Irfan Habib was critical of the way how the labour process was explained by Mohammed Habib to study the nature of the emergence of urban centres in Medieval India. Though Irfan Habib accepts the expansion of urban economy with increase in the number and size of towns, growth in craft production and commerce during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, he says that this happened primarily because of the changes or innovations made in technology for making paper, textiles and buildings; flow of gold and silver for minting coins to promote trade and the formation of the new ruling class that appropriated a large chunk of rural surplus through the new land revenue system and spent in towns, where they resided. However, he argues that these changes happened not because of ‘liberation’ of any segment of society. He maintains that slave labour or unfree labour was vital in almost all the domains of production in the Indian towns of this period (Habib,1978: 289-98).

Scholars like B.D. Chattopadhyaya and R.Champakalakshmi have traced the origins of medieval Indian towns back to ninth century onwards. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, focusing on north-west India, has highlighted the emergence of townships in Indo-Gangetic divide, the Upper Ganga basin and the Malwa region thanks to the forces emitted by trade. He examines the nodal economic points of these geographies and shows that before their emergence as full-fledged urban centres under the Gurjara Pratiharas, they were pivotal points in local trade. He estimates the appearance of 20 towns in Gujarat, 131 in Rajasthan, 78 in Karnataka during the eleventh century and 70 in Andhra during the period between 1000 and 1336 (Chattopadhyaya, 1997: 132-181). Though the origins of many of these towns were caused by trade, a considerable number of them were loci of power for the regional rulers.

However, R. Champakalakshmi focuses on south India and examines several towns of varying size and nature in Chola territory that appeared during the period between ninth and thirteenth centuries thanks to the stimulus from external trade. By her meticulous analysis, she shows that all the medieval south Indian towns were not alike; on the contrary she speaks of marked distinctions visible among the mercantile towns, royal towns, ceremonial-cum-religious towns of the Cholas and the militarised and fortified towns of Vijayanagara kingdom. The revival of long-distance trade in the tenth century and the eventual organisation of commerce by various guilds caused many towns, particularly along the coast, to evolve in Chola territories that extended to Andhra and southern Karnataka. Concomitantly, there also evolved several urban centres with the convergence of surplus from brahmadeyas and temples and with the political and economic power getting increasingly focused on the temple in the ninth century. The latter became the central mobilising institution of royal cities like Tanjavur, where the elites and power groups occupied the spatial ring around the ‘ceremonial centre’ of temple, while the artisan and service groups lived in the outer ring. The new urban processes around viradalam and suradalam, which evolved as militarily protected towns in the thirteenth century, were indicative of the weight of power that the mercantile bodies appropriated by this time. She also refers to fortified urban centres which the nayaks of the militarised Vijayanagara state set up in the areas of their control from fourteenth century onwards as distinct from sacred complex (Champakalakshmi, 1996: 25-72).
The binary opposite of town and countryside has been a tool of analysis for several historians who examined the socio-economic processes of medieval India. What constituted a medieval Indian town of north India has been the focus of analysis for scholars like K.M Ashraf, H.K. Naqvi and W.H. Moreland (Ashraf, 1970; Moreland, 1962; Moreland, 1979; Naqvi, 1968; Naqvi, 1972). Their studies revolved primarily around the examination of the main features of the major towns of north India and their linkages with economic progress. The academic efforts of a large number of scholars working on the city-scape of different parts of medieval India like S.C.Misra, Shireen Moosvi, R.E. Frykenberg, Stephen Blake, Shama Mitra Chenoy, Satish Chandra, K.S.Mathew, Aniruddha Ray, Sinnappah Arasarntam, K.K.Trivedi, I.P.Gupta, J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga helped the emergence of urban history as a separate branch of historical study in India (Moosvi, 2008, 1987; Misra, 1985, 1964; Chenoy, 1998; Frykenberg, 1993; Blake, 1993; Chandra, 1997; Hasan, 2008; Thakur, 1994; Gupta, 1986; Mathew and Ahmad, 1990; Trivedi, 1998; Grewal and Banga, 1985; Banga, 1992, 1991; Arasaratnam and Ray, 1994; Singh, 1985).

Shireen Moosvi focuses more on the major manufacturing towns of north India, which then experienced intense labour processes. (Moosvi, 1987: 300-320). In her recent work she has used details concerning the urban tax-income from different sūbas and cities for examining the degree of urbanisation in Mughal India. She says that the sūba of Gujarat, which had participation in long-distance trade and craft production, had the highest urban taxation (at 18.654% of the jama’) and was the most urbanised region in the empire, and it was followed by the sūba of Agra, where urban taxation was 15.712% of the jama’. On the basis of Āīni Akbarī she has estimated the amount being spent for the maintenance of the urban population and the amount left in the country side for subsistence-level existence. She states that in Mughal India about 17.42% of total population lived in urban centres while 82.58% resided in country side (Moosvi, 2008: 119-134). Stephen Blake studies Shahjahanabad as a “sovereign city” and says that it was personal, familial in nature and was guided by the desires of the patrimonial bureaucratic emperors. To him a sovereign city was an extended patriarchal household of the emperor himself at the micro-level. But from macro-perspective, it was the kingdom in miniature. It was the capital of a patrimonial bureaucratic empire, in whose state formation process the emperor used to extend personal patrimonial control over the space of kingdom through a bureaucratic arrangement. Here the bureaucracy was made loyal to the emperor through nuanced military, political and economic mechanisms and arrangements. ‘Sovereign city’ was the urban expression of the political authority in space and the palace in the city was the symbol of the cosmic order formulated and legitimised by the presence of the emperor (Stephen Blake, Shahjahanabad: Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639-1739, Delhi, 1993). Satish Chandra links the nobility of Medieval India intrinsically with urban culture. Though the nobility in India was not a legal category, unlike in Europe, the nobles being involved in the tasks of government at higher levels reflected a certain level of culture and urbanity (Satish Chandra, Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals, Mughal Empire, 1525-1748, Part –II, New Delhi, 1999, p.379). He also refers to the conflicting conditions of disquiet cities in the eighteenth century India, where the leading nobles or court parties were driven by factions formed on the basis of language, culture, patronage and regional origin (Satish Chandra, Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740, New Delhi, 2002: 280-300).

The various edited works of Indu Banga brought urban historians together to look into the nuanced meanings of urbanism in India. Her edited work Ports and their Hinterlands in India brought before the scholars various conceptual and methodological issues to be addressed while studying the urbanisation processes of port-towns (Indu Banga...
ports and their hinterlands in india, 1700-1950, delhi, 1992). k.s. mathew and afzal ahmad look at the emergence of the portuguese city of cochin in 1527 as a separate urban enclave being distinct from the ‘native cochin’, being administered with its own municipal system. its urban vibrancy rested on the vast wealth from spice trade with various european markets (mathew and ahmad, 1990). sinnapah arasaratnam and anirudha ray show the role of indigenous banking, artisanal manufacture and trade in the development of the urban centres of masulipatnam and cambay. though both the cities were centres of major trans-continental trading networks, eventually they suffered terribly because of hinterland political instabilities and european sea-faring challenges. the various mercantile communities, who became heavily vulnerable to extraneous pressures, could not eventually find means to conduct their business in a sustained way against the background of constantly changing conditions and could not carry forth their mercantile wealth and traditions uninterruptedly from generation to generation (arasaratnam and ray, 1994).

now there is an increasing desire among the urban historians to move away from the study of towns as descriptive categories and look into the value attached to medieval towns. everybody knows that this is not as simple as it may appear to be. the causative factors for the emergence and sustenance of the medieval towns varied from time to time, causing changes to happen in their functional roles. there were cases when towns like agra, which emerged mainly because of political reasons, had accumulated lot of economic meanings in course of time and later grew as one of the most thriving commercial centres of north india even after the shifting of the power base of the mughals to delhi and elsewhere. certain towns like benares, which though emerged mainly because of religious and pilgrimage reasons, became major centre of banking and mercantile activities radically transforming the very economic content of the town. some towns like goa that initially appeared because of trade being the motor, eventually lost its prime mercantile character because of the excessive intervention and control of the portuguese state, which made the various merchant groups flee to commercially liberal spaces in the indian ocean, converting goa eventually as a dry seat of portuguese power bereft of any significant trade and actual substance of power. most of the towns of medieval india underwent this process of radical transformation, as a result of which towns that initially emerged with certain definite types of causes got new functions and roles to play in course of time. this shift was necessitated by the emergence of new power groups and status groups in the city space, who in their eagerness to articulate meanings of their role and position into the physicality of the town, saw to it that the old power groups and their operational-cum- habitational spaces functionally got relegated to background, which conveniently was developed in eventual course of time as an essential condition for asserting the power of the former. the overlapping of urban functions at different time points and the conflicting assertions made by different power groups used to get reflected in the spatial processes and a decoding of urban geographical layers would bring home the chronological sequences of various layers of values and logic inscribed into city space (malekandathil, 2009: 13-38).

3.4 the idea of medieval urbanism

let us look into the nature of urbanism in the medieval period which was greatly guided by polity, trade and society.

3.4.1 commercially and politically charged urbanism

there were basically two types of urbanism that appeared in india during the medieval and early modern period. on the one hand there was the ‘commercially charged
urbanism’ that made appearance in major manufacturing-cum-exchange centres of India thanks to the economic forces emitted by them and on the other hand there was the ‘politically charged urbanism’, where the actual power processes emitted the type of forces required for urbanisation. Delhi formed the principal one among the politically charged urban centres, while Daulatabad, Gulbarga, Gaur, Agra, Lahore, Bijapur, Golconda emerged eventually as other significant ‘political towns’ (Ashraf, 1970:100-210). The commercially charged urban centres evolved along the nodal points of the major trade routes running through the length and breadth of the country. Jaunpur, Burhanpur, Multan, Patna, Ahmedabad, Ujjain, Ajmer and Allahabad (Moreland, 1962 :145-172; Naqvi, 1968:12-130) emerged principally as commercially charged towns, though later with the establishment of provincial capitals in these urban centres, their town -character got a different twist. As commerce and politics were interwoven during this period, very often these two different categories of towns did not exist as compartmentalised insular entities, but as geo-economic units inseparably having the features of the both. These domains had multiple points of intersection. In fact the revival of trade in the 10th 11th centuries stimulated the process of urban dissemination in different parts of India; however the entry of Islam with elements of urban culture borrowed from the erstwhile Sassanid Persia intensified the process, causing several towns and quasi towns to emerge in the hubs of economic and cultural exchanges.

Islam as an ideology introduced certain cultural practices that accelerated the production and consumption of certain particular types of wares for meeting the requirements stipulated by the tenets of the belief system. Because of the Islamic stipulation that both the male and female adherents should cover their entire body with clothes, there suddenly came an enormous demand for various types of cloths and textiles, which in turn intensified weaving activities in an unprecedented way. It is interesting to note here that because of the intrinsic linkages that textile manufacturing had then with Islam and Muslim weavers, many non- Muslim weavers in different parts of India also started observing several of Muslim festivities including Muharram, which some of the Hindu weavers celebrated in Andhra Pradesh with an entirely different nomenclature. This process in the long run attracted like a magnet different groups of people involved in weaving activities to the evolving Islamic enclaves, which soon became the converging points for artisans and traders. Most of the newly emerging towns like Multan, Ahmedabad, Baroda, Surat etc., had a predominant weaver group that was specialised in the manufacturing of various types of textiles (Moreland, 1962: 160-172). The economic forces emitted by the iqtadari system, which created a large class of consumers with immense purchasing-ability, accelerated the process of urban dissemination in a big way. By pumping agrarian surplus to the centres of their habitat, the iqtadars switched on the motors of urbanisation in several enclaves.

### 3.4.2 Urbanism and Sufi and Bhakti Spaces

In many of the smaller towns and qasbas the weavers and the various categories of artisans used to get themselves linked with the Sufi space and the platforms of Bhakti tradition in their efforts to get themselves detached from the ‘abominable and contemptuous position’ that the rural society then thrust on them and to get themselves socially acceptable and receptive to the evolving middle class of these towns. Both Sufism and Bhakti movement evolved as cultural motors of urbanism in many parts of India and through their multiple platforms, ritual practices and ideologies they provided a certain amount of cohesion, meaning and a new type of identity to the otherwise scattered categories of artisans, bolstering their self-pride. This is evident in the metaphors and similes that the saints were then using. Kabir increasingly used metaphors and similes from weaving in his verses (Singh, 1993: 48). Both Sufism and Bhakti movements
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legitimised the culture of work in the attempts to make their ideologies acceptable to the various artisan groups, which in turn helped also to stimulate the process of secondary sector production and urban formations. The inevitable result was the growing reduction in the ability of rural magnates and aristocrats to control labour within the confines of the villages and this was followed by a great flow of workforce to the evolving urban enclaves that favoured work-culture. Maksud Ahmad Khan gives another perception about Sufi impact on urbanisation. To him the Sufi saints who went to remote places and interior geographies propagating the tenets of their masters, were instrumental in their urbanisation process. These remote places over a period of time acquired fame and popularity because of their association with Sufi saints, which in turn made many pilgrims and devotees flock around them, causing them to evolve as urban centres. In this process places like Sylhet (located near Dacca), whose origin and growth is associated with the Sufi pir Shah Jalauddin, became urban units (Khan, 2004: 103-5).

By fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Sufism and Bhakti movements including those of Kabirpanthis and Dadupanthis were increasingly evolving as religious movements of the towns, catering to the spiritual, social and psychological issues predominantly of the urban dwellers, which the mainstream conservative strands of these religions failed to properly address. Irfan Habib (1969: 6-13) also discusses the issue of artisan participation in the Bhakti movements of North India from a different perspective. (Some aspects of Satish Chandra’s perceptions are given earlier. So I am skipping this point here.) The adherents of some of the sects that I mentioned above may appear to be numerically marginal from the present day perspective; but the type of mobilisation that Bhakti movements and Sufism made among the artisan groups of north India and the long-term impact that they exerted on their social and economic formations as dwellers of the evolving towns cannot be ignored. Unlike the rural communities which were stable with various organisational devices, the evolving towns represented anarchic space, with wide gap between the wealthy merchants and poor settlers, with problems of over-employment and underemployment, consequent to which the destitute artisans increasingly resorted to these new religious movements to find a meaning against the background of accumulation of inordinate wealth in the hands of a few. The itinerant weavers and artisans, who went from town to town carrying the new religious values, were also carriers of the newly emerging urban culture. This is seen in a considerable degree in Jaunpur, Gwalior, Mandu, Burhanpur, Varanasi, Panjiana, Panipat, Ahmedabad etc., which by this time had evolved as significant secondary towns and were ably networked by people and institutions linked with commodity movements or by faith-related travels (Grewal, 2006: 325-6; Iraqi, 2009: 56-74; Rizvi, 1978; Lorenzen, 1987: 287-303; Lorenzen, 1981). Kabir whose initial profession was weaving spent a great amount of time in the weaver’s town of Benares, addressing the spiritual and societal issues of urban city-dwellers through his poetical pieces. Dadu who was born of a cotton-carder at Ahmedabad in 1544 kept small towns like Kalyanpur, Kevalpur etc., as his main centres of activities (Callewaert, 1988: 33-6; 67-72).

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1 Here one may find a striking parallel with the religious movements of the Franciscan Friars (the Mendicants), the Dominican Friars (the Predicants), Alleluians, Flagellants, Waldensians, Patarines, Arnoldists, Poor Lombards, Joachimites, Dulciniens, Albigensians and Humiliatis, which spread as religious movements of the evolving medieval European towns, addressing the various issues and sensibilities of urban dwellers. For details see Donald F. Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, London, 2002; pp. 203-14; C. Violante, “Eresie Urbane e Eresie Rurali in Italia dal XI al XIII secolo”, in O. Capitani (ed.), *Medioevo Ereticale*, Bologna, 1977.

3.4.3 Poliscracy

From sixteenth century onwards, the strategy of establishment of a chain of towns both for mobilising resources from the hinterland and also for integrating the far-flung regions with the core centre of power exercise was resorted to by the Mughals and the Portuguese as essential ingredient of their political processes. The imperial foundations of the Mughals and the Portuguese consisted to a considerable extent in the chain of towns, which the rulers or their various power-sharers or their representatives erected along the length and breadth of their empires in the process of extending authority over countryside and extracting its surplus. In that sense that the rule of the Mughals can be called “poliscracy”, which as a term stemming from the Greek word ‘polis’ (town), is indicative of the ‘rule’ of the superior authority through the medium of towns and town dwellers, which in turn made the countryside remain economically and politically subordinate to it in a hierarchical sequence. This view, however, does not deny the fact that countryside also had seeds for expansion or contraction of urban economies. It is true that the rural–urban continuum is to be viewed from both the perspectives. In fact the working of ‘poliscratic’ form of government was facilitated by the creation of several ‘politically charged towns’ and also by adding political meanings to the mercantile towns already in existence.

Among the Mughals it was Akbar who first started the ‘poliscratic’ form of governance with the construction of a chain of towns in key resource-yielding locations as pillars for sustaining his evolving empire. Akbar founded and re-founded or conquered or modified several towns, including the imperial capital cities of Agra (which became the capital of the Mughals during 1565-1571; 1598-1605) Fatehpur Sikri (1571-1585), Lahore (1585-1598) (Hasan, 2008: 225-31). The westward shifting of capital from one city to another corresponded to the geographical conquests that he made westwards, which in turn is indicative of his desire to consolidate his political position over the newly conquered terrains and potentially rebellious enclaves, besides mobilising resources, through the medium of towns, where his co-sharers of power were made to settle down. Consequently, the shifting of power base from one town to another politically ensured cementing and consolidation of his position in the frontier regions of the empire and economically opened the doors of their commodity hinterlands to the circulatory processes that he had already stimulated through his fiscal and economic initiatives. The conquest of Muzaffrid Gujarat (1572-3) made Akbar the master of the vibrant port-towns of Surat, Broach and Cambay, while the occupation of Bengal (1574-6) facilitated him to have control over the evolving towns of Chittagong, Satgaon and Buttor (Betor-Howrah) in Bengal. Chittagong and Satgaon had become towns with establishment of the trading houses of Portuguese private traders and renegades (Campos, 1979: 66-99). The Portuguese had established a chain of huts and bamboo structures at Buttor (Betor-Howrah) along the river as temporary residences and commercial establishments, which they used to set fire on their departure, as is attested to by Caesar Frederick (1969: 411; 439) in 1565. In 1583 Akbar constructed the new town of Allahabad (at the site of old Prayag) with a massive fortress at the converging point of the land-route and the fluvial routes of Ganges as well as Yamuna, which eventually evolved as an economic device to mobilise resources from the eastern Gangetic valley (Richards, 1993: 27-30; 62). One of the major features of the ‘poliscratic’ policies of the Mughals was the frequent shifting of the power base to newer and newer towns along with the expanding political frontiers and for responding to the new political challenges. Thus though Jahangir kept Agra as his power base from 1607 to 1612 and occasionally visited it, he kept on transferring capital to Ajmer, Kashmir and Lahore (Hasan, 2008: 226). Shah Jahan shifted his power base to the newly built city of Shahjahanabad (1639) (Blake, 1993) in Delhi after his initial rule at Agra (1628-1639), while Aurangzeb shifted his capital from Shahjahanabad to Agra (1669-1671) (Hasan, 2008: 226) and finally
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to the city of Aurangabad (1683), (Malekandathil, 2013: 140-159) built in his name in Deccan. Though Agra was often regarded as one of the capital cities of the empire, the court along with major institutions and devices of power was constantly on the move from place to place, creating different categories of intermediaries and activating urbanisation processes along the length and breadth of the empire in a degree and form required for a ‘poliscratic’ form of government.

The ruling class might have been tiny in most of these towns; however the concomitant creation of different segments of intermediaries to cater to their multiple needs accelerated complex labour process in these evolving towns emitting massive waves of urbanisation. In this process of frequent capital-transfers, newer cities were established and the existing ones were stimulated and expanded to meet the new requirements; however the most striking development was that several satellite towns and qasbas were formed as intermediate and secondary urban centres between these mega cities. The wealth from the countryside was increasingly made to get concentrated in these qasbas, where production and exchange activities often for meeting the needs of the superior imperial mega cities used to happen. The qasbas, as feeder towns, formed the economic devices with the help of which the pillars of the imperial mega cities were inserted into the heart of the larger types of commodity hinterland scattered over the vast expanse of countryside. Through these graded hierarchy of towns, which evolved over time on the basis of the degree of labour-intensive hinterland scattered over the vast expanse of countryside. Through these graded hierarchy of towns, which evolved over time on the basis of the degree of labour-intensive activities happening there and remained interlinked as beads in a chain, the resource flow from the countryside to the imperial mega cities took place uninterruptedly in a way that would sustain the costly edifices of the empire, besides satisfying the consumerist demands of the equally hierarchical power classes, their multiple intermediaries, associates and subordinates.

Thus, concomitant to the erection and occupation of various towns was the creation of a long hierarchy of nobility under the mansabdari system as co-sharers of power, who residing in the evolving towns started pumping wealth into it from their jagirs in the countryside. These co-sharers of power turned out to be strongest consumption class, with remarkably high abilities of spending, which stimulated the economy both in the manufacturing of finished products as well as in their exchange processes. Towns turned out to be the principal habitats for these nobles and the jagirs which they used to receive under mansabdari system introduced by Akbar, provided immense wealth for their spending. With a salary of Rs. 25 per month for an ordinary Mughal cavalry man having three horses and Rs.30,000 per mensem as zat salary of a noble of 5000 of the first rank, (Chandra, 2006:160-1) there was an enormous body of hierarchy in every town with spending ability of varying nature who could pump a huge amount of wealth into the market, augmenting the numerical strength and purchasing power of consumption class, which in turn increased the demand for various types of luxurious items like textiles, silken clothes, carpets of silk, tapestry etc. Abul Fazl says that Akbar had ordered that people of certain rank should wear only certain articles, evidently with a view to equating consumption habit with social ranks (Ain-i Akbari, 1977, Vol. I, Ain 32: 94). The lavish spending and the ostentatious consumerist behaviour of the nobles as well as the moneyed groups were increasingly viewed as indexes for their social standing. Consequently manufacturing activities of different nature that catered to the variegated needs of the emerging consumer class, got widely disseminated in towns and in their vicinities, followed by intensification of secondary production and acceleration of trade oriented towards overseas markets.

The promotion of the ‘poliscratic’ government was realised by increasing urban-oriented activities, the chief among them being technological innovations that got intensified from the time of Akbar onwards. Akbar, who was very keen to stimulate the process of craft
production and trade, introduced new technologies in the production of textiles. He got the craftsmen trained in the manufacturing of silken clothes, brocade, tapestry and carpets of silk and brocade in India with a view to making Indian pieces excel the Persian and European ones (Habib, 2005: 132). Efficient masters and experts brought to India by Akbar gave instructions in textile production, at times mixing the Iranian, European and Chinese patterns with Indian. Very often the cities of Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Lahore and Ahamadabad became the laboratories where these technological experiments were frequently done and these cities soon became the major centres for craft-production (Habib, 2005: 132-133). The intensified production of silk and textiles and their trade in Mughal terrain is attested to by the Ain-i Akbari, which also gives a long list of cotton clothes, like khasa (whose price varied between 3 rupees and 15 mohur, per piece), chautar (three rupees to 9 mohur), malmal (4 rupees), tansukh, gangajal (four rupee to five mohur) and bhiraun (four rupee to four mohur). A wide variety of other cotton clothes like salu mihrkal, sirif saf, sahan, fhona, atan, asawali, bafta, mahmudi, panchotoliya, jhola etc., were also taken to the Mughal urban markets for trade (Ain-i Akbari, 1977, Vol. I, Ain 32: 100-101). With the increase in production of textiles over and above the local demand, they were increasingly taken for exchange through the sea ports of Bengal and Gujarat. The Surat-Burhanpur-Agra route (Tavernier, 1925: 40-53; Mundy, 1914: 9-65; Monserrate, 1922: 5-27) and the Surat-Ahmedabad-Agra route were frequently resorted to for linking the production centres of these towns with the port-towns and exchange centres along coastal India (Tavernier, 1925: 54-72; Mundy, 1914: 231-72). From the various north Indian towns finished products were taken to the ports of Bengal through the fluvial route with the help of barges (Habib, 1999: 70) and also through the Grant Trunk road, built by Sher Shah initially from Attock to Delhi (Farooque, 1977: 11) and later extended as a route from Agra to Sonargaon in east Bengal (Qanungo, 1965: 315-6).

3.4.4 Portuguese Cities: Polisgarchic

The Portuguese too resorted to the medium of cities, for sustaining their imperial edifice, but with a different meaning, entirely different from the way the Mughals used them. The Portuguese used cities as economic devices for extracting surplus and making profit from the countryside concentrate on such cities, which they finally took to Europe. Unlike the Mughals who allowed the wealth to circulate within India and who allowed the towns to develop on the basis of responses that the various urban players gave to the requirements of the market and their political exigencies, the Portuguese, who established a chain of towns like Quilon, Cochin, Cranganore, Cannanore, Mangalore, Honawar, Barcelor, Goa, Tana, Bassein, Daman and Diu along the west coast of India, (Silveira, 1991: 80-90; Malekandathil, 2001: 74-5, 148-50, 177-8) had already in their hands certain set- moulds, which they conveniently used for shaping the character and format of their urban enclaves in a way that would maximise extraction from the hinterland (Rossa, 1997). This particular form of Portuguese town-based government that was introduced along the west coast of India can be called ‘polisgarchic’, which though is stemming from the same word polis (town) is used to denote the ‘rule’ of foreign powers through the medium of towns for the purpose of extracting surplus from the hinterland and for the purpose of exerting controls of various nature over native resources and skills. Initially Cochin and later Goa were developed as the fixed core centres of the Portuguese government in India while other Portuguese controlled port-towns along coastal India had supplementing and complementing functions to play in the larger project of extraction (Malekandathil, 2010: 301-328). From 1505 onwards, Cochin was the capital of the Estado da India and it was only in 1530 that the capital of Estado da India was shifted from Cochin to Goa (Godinho, 1982: 34).
The amount of wealth that the Portuguese used to accumulate from the trading activities of their various urban centres located along the west coast of India was enormous. The annual value of private trade happening in the Portuguese town of Cochin around 1610 was 22,80,000 *pardaos*, while that of Goa for the same period was 46, 66, 000 *pardaos*. The annual income from the customs house of the city of Goa was 210000 *pardaos* (Cunha, 1995: 256-7). The annual value of trade of Diu in 1610 was 54, 27, 900 *xerafins*, that of Bassein was 31, 96, 800 *xerafins*, while that of Daman was 1225440 *xerafins* and of Chaul was 6,92,640 *xerafins*. A considerable share of the wealth thus getting accumulated in these towns was appropriated by the Portuguese in the form of customs duty (varying between 3.5 % to 6 %) and transferred to Europe in different forms.

Goa, which happened to be the core centre of power, experienced the highest level of exclusiveness with cultural homogenisation and standardisation introduced by way of commonality of religion, food code, dress code and language code for the residents, while the other towns had varying degrees of inclusiveness and cultural heterogeneity with multi-cultural residents being given varying functional roles to play on the basis of the distance of each town from the power centre of Goa. In the city of Goa, every resident had to adhere to Portuguese religion and Lusitanian cultural practices (Malekandathil, 2009: 25-7), whereas in other Portuguese towns non-Portuguese residents increased proportionate to their distance from the power centre. The general praxis was such that the more distant a town was from the power centre of Goa, the more accommodative its urban space was, both commercially and culturally, as in the case of the Portuguese town of Diu, where only a very few Portuguese people lived, while a considerable chunk of its dwellers happened to be banias (Pearson, 1971: 67-72).

The ‘polisgarchic’ scheme of Portuguese government consisted initially only of their towns along the west coast of India; however, the enclaves that the Portuguese private traders developed along the eastern coast of India like Nagappattinam on the mouth of Kavery, Mylapore and Pulicat near Madras, Devanampattinam near Pondicherry, Hughli in Bengal etc., evolved as mercantile towns, resisting the interference of the extracting and controlling institutions of the Portuguese towns from the west coast (Thomaz, 1994; Subramanyam, 1990; Subramanyam, 1990; Stephen, 1997; Stephen, 2008: 11-21; Malekandathil, 2010: 68-71). The Portuguese private traders wanted to keep their towns function independent of Portuguese *Estado da India*. However, the Portuguese officials were not happy with these developments and twice, in 1547 and 1568, military preparations were made by the Portuguese officials to destroy these private urban settlements along the Tamil coast and to bring these settlers to the official Portuguese enclaves on the west coast of India (Thomaz, 2005: 10-11). But the proposed military expeditions were not carried out and the mercantile urban settlements of the private Portuguese traders were eventually integrated with the ‘polisgarchic’ system of Portuguese governance of the west coast of India through a process of taming done with the help of

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3 This information is inferred from the customs duty of 80, 000 *pardaos* (which is levied at 3.5%) that the king of Cochin used to collect in 1612. BNL, Cod. 11410, fol. 116v, *Orçamento de 1612 Cochin*. This piece of information can be corroborated with the one per cent duty that the city of Cochin used to levy on every trader for the maintenance of the city. The annual average of import for the period from 1587 till 1598 was 7, 34, 900 *pardaos*. BNL, Fundo Geral, Codice No. 1980 “Livro das Despezas de hum porcento”, *Taboada* section, fol. 5-16. Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India*, p.192.

4 This is assessed on the basis of customs duty collected for the same period from Diu (2, 44, 500 *xerafins*), Bassein (1,44,000 *xerafins*), Daman (55,200 *xerafins*) and Chaul (31,200 *xerafins*). (Cunha, 1995: 215).
ecclesiastical institutions like diocese of Mylapore erected in 1606 and the various religious orders, particularly the Franciscan Capuchins in the towns of Coromandel and the Augustinians in Bengal (Meersman, 1982: 61-70; Malekandathil, 2013: 185-204).

3.5 ‘CITY STATES’

Another set of medieval towns that we see in India can be grouped under the section of city states, as in the case of Calicut and Cochin that appeared in extreme south during this period. These were small states or quasi-states that appeared around the port-cities of Calicut and Cochin respectively drawing energy for their political processes from maritime trade in the way city-states appeared around cities in Venice and Florence in Italy (Pölnitz, 1949; Luzzatto, 1961; Lane, 1973); the Hanseatic cities of Bremen, Lübeck, Hamburg and Danzig in Germany (Danzig is now in Poland.); (Pölnitz, 1953; Hellenbenz, 1956: 28-49; Malekandathil, 1999: 3-22) and the Swahili city-states of Mogadishu, Barawa, Pate, Melinde, Mombasa, Pemba, Zanzibar, Kilwa, Sofala and Inhambane in East Africa (Sinclair and Hakansson, 2000: 63-78; Pearson, 1998).

With the returns from the maritime trade from their port-cities, the rulers of the urban nuclei of Calicut and Cochin carved out sizeable hinterland in the process of building states; however these city states of India differ very much from the Hanseatic and Italian city states in political structure and in the way production and exchanges are organised for sustaining their power processes (For study on the city-state of Cochin see Malekandathil, 2001). The port-cities that evolved because of intensified maritime trade became the core areas of power exercise for the city-states of India, while the scattered production centres in the interior were attached to the power-edifice and trading activities of the ports by political conquests. The traces of Calicut emerging as a city-state could be connected with the transfer of the royal residence of the chief of Nediyirappu Swarupam from the inland agrarian pocket of Nediyirappu in Ernad (Malappuram District) to the maritime trade center of Calicut against the background of stimulated maritime trade in the thirteenth century, after having defeated its original chieftain, the Polathiri. Later with the wealth from the trade of Calicut and the support from Muslim mercantile collaborators, the chief of Nediyirappu Swarupam, who eventually took the title of Samoothiri or Zamorin, annexed neighbouring geographies, converting them into pepper hinterland for the maritime trade in Calicut (Malekandathil, 1999: 9). Similarly the chief of the Perumpadappu Swarupam, who had his headquarters in the agrarian belt of Vanneri also started moving down to south, first to Mahodayapuram (Cranganore), and later to the newly emerging settlement of Cochin, where he established his royal residence around 1405. It shortly evolved as an urban unit and with the intensification of maritime trade following the entry of the Portuguese, Cochin became a major city with immense mercantile wealth on the west coast of India and its ruler started consolidating his position in the pepper-hinterland for the purpose of linking the process of production of pepper with the trading activities in Cochin. (Malekandathil, 2001: 30-33). In most of the city-states in Europe like the Hanseatic cities power resided with the merchants and producers living in the cities, while in the city-states of Calicut and Cochin actual power remained with political rulers; but a considerable chunk of power was shared with their major mercantile allies. In this process of power-sharing, a foreign Muslim merchant was given the charge of administering the overseas trade of Calicut, while its domestic trade was handed over to a local Mapilla Muslim. The latter eventually came to be known as the Koya of Calicut, who became one of the highest administratively powerful positions in Calicut. In Cochin the Jewish traders and the Portuguese private traders, besides the Konkanis and the Pattars, were the major mercantile collaborators for the king of Cochin. As councilors and ministers to the king of Cochin, they enjoyed considerable amount of power and clout (Malekandathil, 2007: 33).
However, there was frequent change in their power relations and equations that added nuanced character to the inner dynamics of the city.

### 3.6 SUMMARY

The foregoing analysis makes it clear that a uni-layered perception of medieval town has the danger of losing the multiple meanings that it had articulated into the historical processes of India. There are multiple possibilities and ways of understanding towns of medieval India. It is obvious that historically these towns played the role of bridging the big gap of time with two different sets of socio-economic processes, one from the ancient and the other of the modern times. Besides being a bridge between two time periods, the medieval town had certain intrinsic features which were the concentrated and intensified representations and reflections of larger socio-economic and political processes within which they got evolved.

### 3.7 EXERCISES

1) What are the approaches to study the medieval towns?
2) How did scholars perceive medieval European cities?
3) Comment on Henry Pierenne’s idea of the primacy of medieval towns?
4) Examine Mohammad Habib’s argument of ‘urban revolution’ in the 13th-14th centuries.
5) How are medieval cities of the subcontinent viewed by scholars?
6) What is the idea of ‘commercially and politically charged’ urbanism?
7) What is ‘polisocracy’ and how does it differ from ‘polissargich’ towns?
8) Discuss the historiography of the medieval towns.

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