15.1 INTRODUCTION

Archaeology remains one of the most important sources in the analysis of the growth and character of past settlements. Epigraphy and literature can describe different spaces but it is the material evidence alone that can provide more convincing data on the size, nature and evolution of spatial units. The archaeology of settlements of the post-Gupta era is an area that has been neglected by researchers as a result of which we do not have adequate archaeological data of this period. This module is more an exploratory exercise to identify from this meagre archaeological work the character of sites and its link with ‘urbanism’ in the period 600-1200 CE.

The archaeology of the post-Gupta period has to be understood in the context of the significant political, social and economic changes that occurred during this time in the entire country. Epigraphic and literary sources have been primarily utilised to enumerate this transformation in polity while archaeology remains neglected in this respect.

15.2 POST-GUPTA POLITY

The political scenario in the post-Gupta period (after 600 CE) presented a fragmented system with the emergence of many smaller short-lived regional kingdoms as well as larger long-lived ones like the Cholas, Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas. This phenomenon has initiated intense debate with the idea of ‘feudalism’ at the core of the controversy. However now it has been argued that these states emerged from a process of agrarian expansion and political integration from the areas which were in the periphery or outside the core areas of ancient state formation. The process occurred first in the local nuclear area, then the formation of early kingdoms by integrating the surrounding
peripheral areas and finally the emergence of imperial kingdoms (like the Palas, Cholas), consisting of the nuclear areas and conquered and integrated zones of originally independent neighbours beyond the nuclear zones. Integration worked simultaneously at multiple levels, political, administrative, agrarian, ritual and cultural. These areas did not arise from the centres of the Gupta empire or provincial capitals but in their autonomous peripheral hinterland and in regions which were not conquered but were already under a wide range of influences of the Gupta empire. This period was marked by intensive state formation in areas that were in the heartlands of the earlier large kingdoms and empires (Kulke, 1997; Chattopadhyaya, 1997a).

15.3 URBANISM FROM TEXTS AND INSCRIPTIONS

Linked to the formation of states there is also a debate on the nature of ‘urbanism’ in this period. The ‘feudal’ thesis argued for a decline of cities and towns exemplified with the nature of ‘poor’ material remains as evident from a number of archaeological sites (Sharma, 1987). The critique of this view has mostly used epigraphic and literary data to analyse ‘urban’ centres in the post-Gupta period as archaeological data has been meagre and insufficient for a comprehensive analysis of settlements. This argument states that after an initial lull in the urban process after the second urbanisation in post-Kushana and Gupta periods there was again a burst of urban centres in the early medieval period. There is ample evidence of ‘cities’ both in north and south India which can question the notion of ‘urban’ decline decisively. Urban centres are present in epigraphs and also in literary texts as space or spatial units which can be distinguished from ‘rural’ spaces. The towns of Siyadoni, near Lalitpur in Jhansi district, UP and Ahar, identified with Tattanandapura near Bulandshahar in UP are amongst the many which portray a developed ‘urban’ settlement. This view though stressing the link between the earlier urban centres of the historical period with the early medieval does mention that these new cities unlike their predecessors did not have an epicentre and were far more rooted in their regional contexts. The early medieval urban centres were primarily nodal points in local exchange networks unlike the early historical centres which were directly linked with centres of authority with supra-regional loci (Chattopadhyaya, 1997b).

15.4 URBANISM FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The archaeology of this period remains a problem due to the lack of extensive excavations or explorations as the concentration has been mostly on the study of more ‘ancient’ cultures neglecting the more ‘recent’ aspects of the past. Inscriptions and texts have mainly provided the input for the analysis of settlements. In most archaeological works, the material record especially with habitation sites has been ignored or dismissed as unimportant by researchers. Research on the material remains has concentrated primarily on religious structures, either a monastic or temple complex (Fig. 1) or the study of sculptures (Fig. 2) which have been found in great numbers all over the country. The study of sculptures is not conducive for understanding past settlements as most of these are found in secondary contexts in isolation from other material remains. Structural remains inform us about architecture, mostly religious, but fail to give us any information on human settlements of the time. Moreover in the absence of any diagnostic archaeological criteria like pottery, it has often been difficult to define an archaeological site of this period where sculptures or architecture are not present which is mostly the case with habitation sites. Thus a vast area of the archaeological record has remained outside the purview of academic work on the post-Gupta cultures.
Map 1: Archaeological Remains of the Post-Gupta Period
[Map prepared by Sheena Panja]
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Figure 1: Ruins of Vikramshila
Photograph by Saurav Sen Tonandada, January, 2010
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b3/VikramshilaRuins.jpg

Figure 2: Sculpture of the Pala-Sena Period
Photograph by Sailko, October, 2012
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a0/Bengala%2C_epoca_pala-sena%2C_bodhisattva_kasarpana-lokesvara%2C_1090-1110_ca..JPG
It is with these limitations in mind that we turn to a review of the archaeological record of this period. The emphasis is on the study of human settlements rather than religious structures of which there are many examples.

15.4.1 North India

Taxila in the north-western part of the subcontinent in Rawalpindi district of Punjab in Pakistan is included here as it had been a very important settlement in the earlier historic period but in post-Gupta times we do not have any evidence as to its existence as a major settlement or an urban centre (Marshall, 1951).

Many sites in the Ganga plains are multicultural with cultures stretching up to the last 200 years. Nevertheless with the emphasis on antiquity the later periods have been ignored in most archaeological excavations and explorations. However many of the sites do have evidence of the post-Gupta period but the meagre nature of the remains has led to the theory that there was a ‘decline’ in the lifestyle of the population i.e. a deurbanisation as argued by R.S. Sharma in his thesis on the emergence of feudal systems in this chronological period (Sharma, 1987).

It is true that many sites are reported to be bereft of material remains of this period like Atranjikhera (Gaur, 1983) and Kausambi (Sharma, 1960) or a disturbed archaeological record as at Hastinapur (Lal, 1954), Sringaverpura (Lal, 1993) and Ahicchatra (Vikrama, 2014) with flimsy structures, few stone images, pottery and other material objects. In many cases like at Hastinapur and Sringaverpura the dates of these layers often merge with the post-1200 CE or the ‘medieval’ period and it is difficult to differentiate the earlier phases. At Hastinapur, situated in Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh, Period V is dated from the eleventh century CE and is characterised by structures of brick-bats including a brick wall and a room, alongside pottery, iron objects, terracotta objects and three stone images. In sites like Sravasti in Uttar Pradesh (Sinha, 1967) the remains are mostly of religious structures. Sonkh (Hartel, 1993) in Mathura district, Uttar Pradesh also portrays a picture of destruction and decay with fragments of mostly unconnected walls. The newly built structures were of poor quality due to the frequent use of brick-bats and rubble instead of compact bricks. However stone plaques with Hindu deities have been recovered from the excavations. Lal Koi in Delhi has been divided into the Rajput period from the eleventh to the twelfth centuries CE and has yielded no major structures except rubble walls and mud and lime floors and pottery mostly red wares. However the subsequent phase called the early Sultanate from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries CE has yielded more structures and artefacts. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between these two phases at many sites due to the lack of systematic excavations (Mani, 2006). It has also been argued that the theory of ‘urban decline’ based on ‘poor’ material remains could well be due to archaeological methodology employed in many of the sites, whereby excavation strategies and problems of chronology may have biased the data and interpretations. However even though the concept of decay might be debatable this was however a period of transition and change rather than growth and stability (Kennet, 2013).

On the other hand we do find evidence of ‘urban’ like activity at sites like Rupar (Sharma 1953) (or Ropar) in Rupnagar district, Punjab. Situated on the banks of the Sutlej, the occupation in the ninth century CE spread to the southern part of the site with well constructed spacious brick buildings suggesting a good measure of prosperity (Sharma, 1953). At Purana Qila in Delhi, the Post-Gupta period was marked mainly by structural remains in baked or mud-bricks showing three phases. The baked bricks used in the structures had mostly been robbed from houses of the earlier periods. The size of mud-bricks was 30 × 24 × 4 cm. An interesting feature of the structures was the
presence of various types of ovens. Amongst noteworthy objects, mention may be made of a few decorated potsherds, beads, and a fine but damaged stone sculpture. The associated pottery was mainly a red ware, in which the knife-edged bowl was a distinctive type (Fig. 3). The subsequent period called the Rajput period (tenth to twelfth centuries CE) was also characterised by structures built of re-used bricks as also of mud-bricks. One of the house-walls showed alternate courses of baked and mud-bricks. Mud-floors with hearths were also encountered in some houses. The most impressive structure of the period, however, was a fortification-wall, belonging perhaps to the time of the Tomars. Built of rubble with a basal width of 1.5 m, it was exposed to a length of over 30 m. The Rajput period was represented by five structural phases, one of them showing floors with ovens. The principal building-material was the same as in the preceding period, with the addition of rubble. Other significant finds of the period included copper coins, carnelian beads, terracotta objects, ornate moulded bricks and a small figure of Vishnu in stone. The associated pottery was mainly of red and black wares, occasionally decorated with simple painted, stamped or incised designs (Indian Archaeology - A Review, 1969-70:4-5; Indian Archaeology - A Review, 1970-71:8-11).

Figure 3: Typical Knife-edged Bowl from the site of Balupur

Kamuaj a well known ancient city situated on the banks of the Bhagirathi, Farrukhabad district, UP, despite being an imposing site, was unfortunately excavated for a single season and yielded structural remains whose date can be said to coincide with the late medieval periods according to the excavators. Sculptures and terracotta plaques of the post Gupta periods had been discovered here as part of earlier explorations in the area (Indian Archaeology- A Review, 1955-56:19; Ghosh, 1989:199-200). Rajghat is a well known site situated in Varanasi, UP and excavations have revealed that the period 300-700 CE marked a great advance in settlement planning and architecture. This is revealed by the development of houses and town planning. Houses were of considerable size with room sizes ranging from 7.08 × 6.25 to 2.30 × 1.30 m. There were large structures close to the river which could not be classified as residential houses. One of the structures had large pillared halls. Underground structures the purpose of which is debatable have also been unearthed. There were wells and brick-built drains. The city had a regular layout divided by many roads and lanes. The town was well planned with elaborate drainage systems, large buildings both residential and ‘public’, industrial activity and religious structures. All this testified to a large urban centre which had earlier roots but stretched into the post-Gupta phase. This is also evident from the smaller excavations where Period V (700-1200 CE) has evidence of brick walls, two big buildings and
many architectural fragments (Singh, 1985). The site of Ahar in Bulandshahar district, UP covering almost 3800 acres in area, yielded a very large sandstone inscription of ninth to tenth centuries CE as well as a series of well made pottery, silver coins datable to 900 CE or earlier, copper artefacts, stone objects and a stone head dated to the tenth to eleventh centuries CE. Excavations also revealed the existence of a large house with several rooms, a platform with a brick structure and other buildings including a series of chambers with a hearth (Annual Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1925-26:57-58).

15.4.2 Eastern India

Numerous inscriptions from both north and south Bihar testify to the importance of this region in the post-Gupta period. Like in other parts of the country many historical sites like Vaisali, Patnaiputra and Champa do not have any material remains of this time. Archaeological work of this period concentrated on uncovering monastic establishments like Nalanda or Antichak (Singh and Kumar, 2006) or discovering sculptural remains. From Kurkihar almost 200 bronze images have been found. Another site Itkhori in Hazaribagh near the Dudhapani inscription site has yielded both Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures made from a stone not available locally. Sculptures and architectural remains have also been found from many other places in north Bihar made from non-local stones. A single gold coin of Sasanka, three gold coins of Lalitaditya Pratapaditya of Kashmir, a gold coin of Govindachandradeva and silver coins of Bhoja I Pratihara have been found from Nalanda. All this indicates some sort of economic network and trade or exchange connections. Nalanda also has evidence of furnaces which indicates some form of industrial activity (Kumar, 2014). Even though the emphasis has been on excavating structural remains in this zone, habitation areas can be identified at two of the following sites.

Krimila is an area identified as Krimila Adisthana near Lakhisarai in Bihar. There are more than thirty mounds as well as image inscriptions and numerous Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures. A Siva temple had been excavated by Alexander Cunningham who had explored this area in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This is an extensive settlement complex covering an area of almost 30 sq km but no excavations have been conducted here so far (Kumar, 2011). Chirand in Saran district, Bihar, on the banks of the Ghagra, has evidence of the Pala period in Period V with substantial structural remains including eighteen courses of a brick structure (Verma, 2007).

The excavations at the port sites of Manikpatana near Puri and Khalakapatana near Konarak in Orissa have given evidence of external trading links especially with China between eleventh to fourteenth centuries CE even though no habitation remains have been unearthed (Patnaik, 2014).

Archaeological remains of the post-Gupta period have been discovered in many parts of West Bengal, but here again however the concentration has been on religious structures and their architecture as well as the study of the numerous sculptures found in isolated contexts throughout the state. In this region there is a continuity of occupation in many of the sites from the early historic period, however new areas of occupation are also visible in many sub-regions.

Rajbadidanga in Murshidabad has evidence of another monastic complex though no complete plan of any building was recovered. But the presence of platforms, stupa basements, staircase and pavements as well as plethora of seals and sealings bearing legends of individual names and the name of the monastery speak of a Buddhist monastery identified as the illustrious Raktamritika sangharama. This site and its environs
have been identified with the capital city of Sasanka, Karnasuvarna which has many other mounds and archaeological remains within its surroundings (Das, 1968).

Structural remains have also been discovered at Ballal Dhipi in Nadia district. The excavation revealed a gigantic brick structure in an extensive yard surrounded by walls. Excavators surmise that this could have been a temple. Stucco heads, terracotta human and animal figurines, copper utensils and other objects were found at the site (Indian Archaeology- A Review, 1982-83:105; Indian Archaeology- A Review, 1983-84:94-95).

The area in the Ganga-Mahananda and Tista-Mahananda floodplains in north Bengal which falls in a part of the ancient region of Varendra has evidence of numerous sites and site complexes of this period. This zone became an important area of occupation from the Gupta and post-Gupta periods onwards with evidence of earlier occupation at a few sites like Bangarh in Bengal and Mahasthan in Bangladesh. The famous monastic complex at Jagjivanpur (Roy, 2012) is situated in this region where an inscription has also been discovered with the name of the monastery, Nandadirghivihara. There are also many habitation zones with mounds, sculptures, and other archaeological evidence indicating this region was an important zone from the seventh century CE. Mention may be made of the large settlement complexes along the Cheeramati river in South Dinajpur district which has evidence of habitation, structures, sculptures (Panja, 2002). The site of Balupur (or Picchli), in Malda district situated along the Kalindri river was excavated to reveal occupation from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries CE. The period seventh to twelfth centuries CE revealed evidence of a settlement with mud and rammed brick floors, evidence of crafts like pottery and beads as well as the presence of Chinese coins which indicate external networks. This site has evidence of a pottery sequence of this period (Fig. 4) (Panja et.al, 2015). The site of Bangarh (Fig. 5) in South Dinajpur district, West Bengal, with a cultural sequence from the historic period has yielded rich material evidence of the post-Gupta period. The site has many mounds with the main mound called the citadel mound surrounded by a rampart wall with bastions, gateway and a moat. Beyond the main mound is the habitation area which is now a modern village. Stratum II which represents the post-Gupta or the ‘Pala’ period includes a pillared hall, a number of bricks with human and animal figures and a lotus shaped structure called the ‘Kunda’ by the excavator. There are also two structures with sixteen low pillars probably used for storing grains. Other than this there are residential buildings, houses and compound walls and pavements. A structure claimed to be a temple has also been found at Bangarh (Goswami, 1948). In the middle region (Rahr) of Bengal sites like Mangolkot, an important early historic site, in Burdwan district have evidence of occupation after 700 CE. The Gupta period is characterised by burnt-brick structures, as well as artefacts like seals, beads, bangles suggesting renewed commercial activity (Roy, 1990). The post-Gupta period is disturbed with remains of brick structures and pottery (Indian Archaeology - A Review, 1988-89:91; Indian Archaeology - A Review, 1989-90:110). Goswamikhandha, also in Burdwan district also has a large structure which has been dated to the tenth century CE (Indian Archaeology- A Review, 1963-64:60-61). Bahiri in Birbhum have yielded structures in the post Gupta period though convincing evidence is lacking. In the western part temple complexes have been found in Purulia and Bankura as well as scattered archaeological remains mostly sculptures and pottery in many parts of the western zone of the state (Chattopadhyaya, 2010). In south Bengal the most notable historical site is Chandraketugarh in North 24-Parganas, beside the Bidyadhari river, where a large structure at Khana Mihirer Dhibi has been dated to the Gupta period. However S. K. Saraswati has dated it to the Pala period from the plan, architecture and plinth mouldings. The settlement continued to flourish
during the post-Gupta phase where structural remains have been found (Ghosh, 1989). In both North and South 24-Parganas, West Bengal there is evidence of post-Gupta remains like sculptures at Atghara, Mandirtala, Kulpi, evidence of structures at Katandighi, a temple at Jatar Deul at the edge of the Sunderbans and a plaque of proto-Bengali inscriptions at Pakurtala. The site of Kankandighi has many mounds which are strewn with sculptures (Chakrabarti, 2001).

Figure 4: Pottery Shapes of the Early Medieval Period from the site of Balupur
15.4.3 Bangladesh

The archaeological remains in Bangladesh are mentioned here as they form a part of the ancient zone of Varendra. Very large settlement complexes like Mahasthan and the monastic complex at Paharpur are some of the major areas. The Birampur area in Dinajpur district Bangladesh has revealed a large settlement complex, but excavations have concentrated mostly on the Buddhist and Brahmanical structural remains and thus the habitation zones are not very well understood.
Mahasthan or Mahasthangarh in Bagura district, (Fig. 6 and Map 2) the earliest and the largest archaeological site in Bangladesh, with a long cultural sequence consists of the ruins of the ancient city of Pundranagara. The site is 13 km north of Bogra town. The northern, western and southern sides of the fortified city were encircled by a deep moat, traces of which are visible in the former two sides and partly in the latter side. The river Karatoya flows on the eastern side. Many more mounds lie scattered in adjacent villages, which are believed to contain cultural remains of the suburbs of the ancient fortified city of Pundranagar. Period V represents the Gupta and late-Gupta phase. Period VI represents the Pala or post-Gupta phase, evidenced by architectural remains of several sites scattered throughout the eastern side of the city, like Khodar Pathar Bhita, Mankalir Kunda, Parasuram’s Palace and Bairagir Bhita. This was the most flourishing phase and during this period a large number of Buddhist establishments were erected outside the city. In addition to these sites, excavations have revealed three gateways of the city, a considerable portion of the northern and eastern rampart, and a temple complex near the mazar area. Apart from this there is evidence of many monumental structures like brick walls, tower, a large building (21x17 m for the main room to which two little rooms of unclear utility were added later to the north) surrounded by thick walls (1.5 m) and divided in its inner space by two rows of square pillars and a large circular platform of 4.3 m in diameter. The antiquities recovered from the site include a few large size terracotta plaques, toys, balls, ornamental bricks, and earthenwares (Alam and Salles, 2001).

The well known monastic complex Somapura Mahavihara at Paharpur in Naogaon district, has been the subject of research for decades concentrating on art and architecture. However recent work in this area has identified an extensive habitation zone encircling the complex which indicates that the religious establishment was not existing in isolation from the main social-economic processes of the time. Extensive structural and habitation remains as well as tanks have been found at Goal Bhita in the northeast corner of the mahavihara (Sen, 2014). Birampur in Dinajpur district, Bangladesh, has yielded clusters of archaeological remains with structures and pottery scatters as well as both buried and mound sites. Some of the clusters like Chandipur-Garhipinglai cover an area of 310 hectares. Excavations have been conducted at the structural complexes at Tileswardanga and Bowal Mandap which are religious in nature of both Brahmanical and Buddhist significance (Sen, 2015).

15.4.4 South India

In this region many of the sites occupied in the historic period do not have material remains of the post Gupta era. However there is evidence of many architectural remains of this period and thus researchers have concentrated on the temple cities and structural architecture, but inscriptions mention many large cities and urban life the evidence of which is still lacking from archaeology. For example, Kaveripattanam in Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu is known for temples and architecture but no habitation remains have been unearthed (Soundara Rajan, 1994). (For temple complex at Kaveripattanam see Unit 19 of this Block).
Map 2: The Settlement Complex of Mahasthan
Excavations at Talkad in Mysore district, Karnataka, though concentrating on temples and their architecture did uncover some parts of the habitation in levels VII with existence of a brick wall and well planned water supply with many channels and ponds (Devaraj, 1996). Kanchipuram in Chingleput district, Tamil Nadu is known for its temples, but Pallavamedu in Kanchipuram has yielded archaeological evidence of the Pallavas. Three periods of occupation have been identified, Period I with pottery and other artefacts, Period II with mud floors, hearths and platforms and Period III with pottery and disturbed structural remains. Excavations have been conducted in many sites in Tamil Nadu associated with dynasties of this period like Pandyas (Korkai), Cholas (Kurumbanmedu and Palyarai) and Hoysalas (Kannanur) and mostly artefacts including pottery have been recovered but no structural remains except an irrigation system at Kannanur and a brick wall at Palayarai (Sridhar 2004). At the excavations at Yelleshwaram in district Nalgonda, Andhra Pradesh, on the banks of the Krishna river, Period V yielded structures of rubble stone with brick, an iron smelting factory, glass bangles and sculptures. Votive shrines were also found here (Khan 1963). Banavasi-Gudnapur area in North Kanara district, Karnataka, known for the Kadamba dynastic rule has also been the subject of an archaeological survey in recent times. From the seventh to the sixteenth centuries CE shiva temples replace the stupas and there is indication of the expansion of the settlement from the presence of extensive pottery scatters, construction of reservoirs, a basalt stone manufacturing site and presence of iron slag indicating some production activity. The settlement seems to have shifted to a different zone than the earlier period due to the absence of later period ceramics in the area of the early historic settlement (Suvarathan, 2013). At Aihole in Karnataka, the concentration has been on the study of the famous temple complex in this zone but recent survey work has shown that the early Chalukyan temples were a part of a larger settlement system with the discovery of pottery scatters, reservoirs, large architectural complex with a pillared hall and room blocks, stone quarries and mortars in the 1 sq. km area surrounding the temple complex. The pottery found was mostly jars as opposed to bowls which might indicate cooking and storage (Kadambi, 2011).

15.4.5 Western and Central India

Many sites in these regions were not occupied after the chalcolithic and historical periods like Nasik, Nevasa and Navdatoli in Maharashtra, which do not have any remains of the post-Gupta period. They are occupied in what is called the ‘medieval’ period after 1300-1400 CE (Sankalia and Deo, 1955; Sankalia et.al, 1958). However there is evidence of large well planned settlements in many zones within this area.

Sirpur (Fig. 7) in Chhattisgarh, a village situated on the right bank of the Mahanadi in Chattisgarh was the capital of Sarabhapuriyas and Panduvamsis of South Kosala from sixth century CE. Excavations at this site have yielded evidence of large secular and religious structures. Whether this settlement can be called a ‘urban’ centre is open to debate but there is evidence of what has been called a palace with a verandah on wooden pillars, with thick brick walls, large rooms and double storied houses. Every temple had a residential quarter and a tank (Sharma, 2012).
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Mansar, a small town on National Highway No. 7 lies to the north-east of Nagpur in Nagpur district in Maharashtra. This site has yielded evidence of a temple and palace of the Vakataka period and a Mahavihara said to be built during the Vishnukundin’s presence in this area after the fifth century CE. However no habitation remains were unearthed during the excavations (Joshi and Sharma, 2005). At Prakash in Dhule district, Maharashtra, Period IV did yield some remains of the sixth to eleventh centuries CE like beads, figurines, bangles, pottery, copper objects and other artefacts but no structural remains were unearthed (Thapar, 1967).

Excavations at the port site of Sanjan in Valsad, Gujarat revealed structures, ring wells, a mortuary structure typical of the Parsi community, temple fragments, foreign and local ceramics and other artefacts to confirm the existence of an urban settlement and the presence of the Parsis here between the eight to the thirteenth centuries CE (Gupta et.al, 2004). This is evidence of the fact that during this period many communities from outside the country came and settled here. Vadnagar, located in the northeastern part of Gujarat, is one of the state’s ancient towns. The initial settlement of Vadnagar was established on the left bank of a wide shallow depression, possibly a remnant of the palaeo-channel of the Sabarmati River, presently flowing about 15 km southeast of the town. Period III from the first to the eleventh centuries CE is represented by a 7.60m to 9.00m thick cultural deposit. This period ushered in a new beginning in the life of the town. The interior of the prosperous town seems to have been re-laid according to new planning, and the earthen rampart was replaced with a strong burnt-bricks fortification, though with reduced breadth. It is evident that at this level the settlement planning was done afresh along with some alteration in the fortification. The plans and sections of the excavated trenches indicate that this revised planning of the town remained unchanged for more than 1,000 years. It appears that Vadnagar continued through several dynasties that ruled over Gujarat. Archaeologically, this deposit has yielded cultural material that can be associated with hitherto known periods of Gujarat history such as the Kshatrapas, Maitrakas, Gurjar Pratiharas and the Solankis. The next period from twelfth to
seventeenth centuries CE begins with major repairs and renovations to the fort wall carried out during the time of Solanki king Kumarpala. This archaeological evidence noticed in this cutting during the excavation corroborates well with the description of the twelfth century CE inscription of king Kumarpal that is exhibited at the Arjunbari gate in the northern wall (Rawat, 2011).

15.5 CHARACTER OF ‘URBANISM’

‘Urban’ centres have been mentioned in many inscriptions and literature of the post-Gupta period but archaeology has yielded very meagre information on the topic. This is an aspect which distinguishes this period from the earlier urbanisation dating from sixth century BCE where archaeological data albeit limited gives us a picture of settlements of the time. However it is with the limitations in mind that we can begin to talk of the variation of space through material evidence.

As far as ‘urban’ centres are concerned, the first aspect to discuss is how do we define ‘urban’ space. Epigraphy provides us with a definition of a space which can be distinguished from ‘rural’ space where aspects of cultivable land or pasture are mentioned. Archaeologically we need to use other parameters to distinguish different types of spatial units. Size cannot always be a criteria, for example large complexes like Nalanda cannot be really called an ‘urban’ settlement. (Chattopadhyay, 1997b). Other criteria like moats, fortifications, large size of houses, specialised craft activity, presence of trade have to be treated with caution in analysing settlements of the past as these are not features present in all ‘urban’ sites. Many settlements which can be treated as ‘urban’ like Rajbadiganga (which corresponds to the city of Karnasuvarna) do not have any fortification walls, nor is there any compact enclosed space in many complexes like Krimila, or Birampur. The size and type of houses cannot be a criterion always as in many terrains like a flood prone zone like north Bengal, domestic houses are usually built with impermanent material while more ‘public’ structures are permanent due to the unstable region where river shifting and floods wash away all traces of habitation. But these sites can also be called ‘urban’ due to other aspects like craft, trade or large size like the site of Balupur in West Bengal. The space which speaks of exchange and manufacturing areas can also be considered as ‘urban’. Inscriptions from south India give details about these centres as well as functioning of guilds and trading communities. Therefore an archeological site or a complex of sites is designated ‘urban’ on the basis of size, type of structures, industrial and trading activity.

Archaeological remains of this period can be divided into religious structures like monastic complexes or temples, secular architecture, habitation zones as well as isolated discoveries of sculptural pieces some which are inscribed, architectural fragments, pottery, seals and sealings. Sculpture and architecture form the major source of material evidence of this period. The main questions which arise in our analysis of ‘urbanism’ of the post-Gupta period are: 1) What are the various types of settlements we get in this period? 2) Can we identify any of these as ‘urban’ cities? 3) Is there a difference with the urbanism of the early historic period? 4) What are the salient features of post-Gupta ‘urbanism’?

There is no doubt that we find a large proliferation of settlements in different parts of the country in this period. It is true that many of the sites which represented ‘urban’ centres in the Ganga plains often have evidence of disturbed archaeological remains which has led to the theory of the ‘urban decline’ (Sharma, 1987). But there is evidence of a space which we can call ‘urban’ in many sites even with the limited material record available between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE.
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The archaeological record with evidence of large settlements in all parts of the country testify to the growth of ‘urban’ centres during this period on a pan-Indian level. At Rajghat in the Ganga plains we find evidence of settlement planning and large structures during 300-1200 CE. At Purana Qila we find remains of a fortification wall and structures of mud bricks between tenth to eleventh centuries CE. At Rupar on the Sutlej we also see large brick buildings and the semblance of increased prosperity at the site from ninth century CE. In areas like present day Bihar we find the remains of very large site complexes like Krimila with numerous inscribed sculptures. Chirand also has evidence of substantial structural remains. Sculptures of non-local stone, coins have been found in many other sites including the famous Nalanda complex which indicates a significance beyond a ‘religious’ sphere (Kumar, 2014). West Bengal and Bangladesh have yielded a lot of material remains testifying to development of settlements with an ‘urban’ character in many sites like Bangarh, Mahasthangarh, Mangolkot. Structural remains are found at Rajbadidanga said to be in Karnasuvarna the city of Sasanka as well as near Chandraketugarh and Goswamikhandha. In north Bengal and Bangladesh the number of settlements increased from the earlier phase and settlement complexes dating to the post-Gupta period are found in many zones, the prominent of which is the Cheermati river and the Birampur complex. Other sites in south, western and central India also show evidence of ‘urban’ activity like Yelleswaram, Pallavanedu, Sirpur, Vadnagar, with substantial walls, large structures and industrial activity. The site Sanjan indicates the presence of foreign communities involved in trading activities in this period.

Survey around sites like Paharpur which are known for their imposing monastic structure have also shown evidence of habitation activity indicating that even religious complexes did not exist in isolation. This is seen even with the temple complexes of south India where survey in Talkad and Aihole have identified extensive habitation areas around the temples. The problem remains however as to how to relate this habitation zone around a religious complex with an ‘urban’ formation. Here the concept of ‘temple urbanism’ (Heitzman, 1987; Champakalakshmi, 1996) applied to understand the growth of urban processes in south India is a useful starting point. It has been argued that the sites that grew around temples during the Chola period exhibit a variety of traits that classify them as ‘cities’. Monumental architecture, occupational specialisation, trading networks, and interaction with a wider hinterland all characteristics of urban growth were present in these temple cities. But the problem remains as to whether these aspects were geared only towards the temple or formed part of a wider multifunctional society which would be more commensurate with an ‘urban’ centre. Temple settlements with a monofunctional character could not be labelled as ‘urban’. The archaeology of these sites around religious complexes present a similar problem of identification and further work is required to understand whether the presence of habitation zones around a sacred centre can be characterised as a ‘city’ (For details on temple towns see Unit 19 of this Block).

‘Urban’ like settlements are therefore present in many parts of the country during this phase. The presence of a plethora of sculptural remains often carved out of non-local stone do demonstrate some organised exchange network which is not commensurate with a ‘rural’ exchange network. The presence of large religious structures within settlements also show the link between religion and stratified communities which supported and created many of these centres.

How was this process different from the earlier cultural phase? It has been suggested that after a lull in the second urbanisation phase there was again a surge in the urban process called the third urbanisation (Chattopadhyaya, 1997b). Many of the historical sites are not occupied in the subsequent periods; in many settlements the material culture reflects what has been called a ‘decay’ in material culture. But there are sites which
exhibit a continuity of culture like Bangarh, Mahasthangarh, Chirand, Rupar and others; hence this cannot be termed a universal phenomenon. It is therefore difficult to accept the view that the growth of settlements in the post-Gupta period was a separate historical process from the earlier phase but differences remain as to the nature of the settlements.

What were the salient features of this ‘urbanisation’ that occurred from the seventh century onwards? To understand the nature of settlement activity one has to contextualise them in the changes in polity that were present at this time, the aspect of intensive regional state formation and political, economic, cultural integration.

Literary and epigraphic evidence shows that these ‘urban’ like settlements were more rooted in their regional and local contexts than their earlier counterparts (Chattopadhyaya, 1997b). Archaeology seems to indicate this regional and subregional character of settlements during this period. It has been surmised that historical cities had an epicentre from which it expanded to different parts of the subcontinent. This probably resulted in some sort of uniformity in archaeological material in most of the sites of this period. Post-Gupta cities on the other hand did not have an epicentre and hence they were more regional in character thus portraying a greater variety of material remains (Chattopadhyaya, 1997b). There is a great amount of variability present both in material culture (for example pottery) as well as in the urban process itself. For example we do not have any diagnostic ware of this period like the Northern Black Polished ware (and its variations) found during the historical period in many parts of the country.

Unlike the historical period these sites were not compact with a central core region and no post-Gupta settlement can be compared with a Kausambi or Hastinapur. Post-Gupta urban cities were more dispersed in nature being a complex of sites rather than a complex of mounds as in the historical period. It is true that in many sites like Bangarh or Mahasthangarh there was a fortified core area but it was not present in other sites like the Birampur complex or Krimila which was a constellation of sites encompassing both religious, political and social dimensions. The Talkad, Aihole or Paharpur complexes portray this link between religion and the settlement system as a whole. It is prudent to speak of urban complexes rather than urban sites to understand the settlements in a holistic perspective.

Another characteristic of this period is that we see the growth of settlements in many new areas which came into the fold like many parts of north Bengal which do not have a rich historical material record except at a few sites. Outlying regions were also brought into the system with areas like the semi-arid western part of West Bengal where we find settlements and architecture of this period. An important zone is the Himalayan region where there is evidence of the emergence of states with political centres and nodes of exchange. The Chamba state is an important example in this respect where the Mushana dynasty founded the city of Champaka (Chamba) or the city of Karttikeyapura in Kumaun district (Majumdar, 1964 pp.122-23; Sharma, 2004). Archaeological evidence of habitations is however scarce in these areas and the emphasis has been on religious structures and monuments.

It is difficult to come to a definite conclusion about the evolution and nature of ‘urbanism’ from the archaeological remains but we can demonstrate that there was a proliferation of settlement activity in many parts of the country, many of which can be designated as ‘urban’. These dispersed site complexes were characterised by large structures, exchange networks, industrial activity, religious monuments, sculptures and other aspects of material culture, unlike the compact settlements of the earlier phase. Variation and diversity is the key to understanding the nature and formation of urban centres in this period. The evolution of these settlements was not a uniform phenomenon but should be understood
as encompassing diverse formation processes with a distinct regional and subregional character.

However the paucity of archaeological material of this period is the major lacuna for identifying settlements of this period, the evidence limited to literature and epigraphy. Future archaeological work needs to move away from the art/architecture centred approach and understand a settlement from a holistic perspective encompassing social, political, religious and economic dimensions. It is at regional and subregional level that research has to be directed to unravel the variability of the ‘urban’ process. It is through this approach that one can move away from the prevailing model of a ‘historical city’ and understand the diversity and regional character of the post-Gupta ‘urban’ settlement complex.

15.6 SUMMARY

Post-Gupta polity was marked by the emergence of regional kingdoms as a result of agrarian expansion in the ‘peripheral’ hinterlands, away from the ‘core’. The archaeological evidence contests the so-called ‘feudal’ thesis that towns and cities declined during the post-Gupta period. The urban centres that emerged were rather rooted in local exchange networks. Though old existing urban centres showed signs of decline (Taxila, Atranjikhera, Kausambi, Hastinapur), a number of new urban centres with brisk trading activities emerged (Bangarh, Mahasthangarh, Paharpur, Aihole, Krimila). It clearly suggests that what is termed as ‘deurbanisation’ process in the post-Gupta period does not hold ground. These new emerging centres were more rooted at the regional and local levels. Unlike the earlier cities one does not find any unifying epicenter that could suggest the emergence of an uniform pattern, instead it was more heterogeneous and dispersed in nature.

15.7 EXERCISES

1) ‘Early medieval centres unlike the early historic centres were primarily nodal points in local exchange.’ Comment.


3) Examine R.S. Sharma’s theory of deurbanisation in the light of the contemporary archaeological remains in the post-Gupta period.

4) What are the salient features of post-Gupta urbanism?

5) Identify the similarity and dissimilarity of the urbanism of post-Gupta period to that of early historic period.

15.8 REFERENCES


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