UNIT 33   URBANISM

Structure

33.1   INTRODUCTION

Through the ages urbanism and the towns have been associated and identified with the growth of civilisation and recognised as hubs of cultural activities. In almost all the societies we have stories and tales about their towns having great splendour, wealth, magnificent palaces, aristocratic living, centres of intellectual life, abode of great literary geniuses and cauldroms of people from varying races and cultural background. In fact many societies were known by their splendid towns rather than other attributes. During medieval period all parts of the world underwent a rapid phase of urbanisation and witnessed a proliferation of towns. They acquired their specific characteristics and were seen as quite different from the rural areas or countryside. They had their own dynamism and symbolised onward march of various societies towards growth and progress, also as the lands of opportunities for the people with skills and talent. For peasants and serfs oppressed by rural subjugation towns were a ray of hope for severing their feudal ties, a land of opportunity for economic and social success, where they could hope to achieve their due share of wealth.

There was a popular proverb for German medieval towns i.e., "the air of the city makes one free." Marx defined the specificity of the feudal town in the west as follows; "The history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but of cities founded on landed property and agriculture; Asiatic history is a kind of undifferentiated unity of town and countryside (The largest cities must be regarded here as royal camps, as works of artifice created above the economic construction proper); the middle Ages (Germanic period) begins with the land as the seat of history whose further development then moves forward in the opposition between town and countryside; the modern age is the urbanisation of the country, not ruralisation of the city as in antiquity". According to eminent French historian F. Braudel ; " Towns, cities, are turning points, Watersheds of human history. When they first appeared, bringing with them the written word, they opened the door to what we now call history. Their revival in

Europe in the eleventh century marked the beginning of the continent's rise to eminence. When they flourished in Italy, they brought the age of the Renaissance. So it has been since the city-states, the *poleis* of ancient Greece, the *medinas* of the Muslim conquest, to our own times. All major bursts of growth are expressed by an urban explosion." (Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life,* p. 479)

The process of Urbanism and the growth of towns and cities is to be seen in the perspective of growth of civilisations and in the medieval period as the centres and instruments of transition to modern period.

In this Unit we propose to discuss the emergence of towns and the role they played in human societies both ancient and medieval. Our focus would be more on the medieval towns. In terms of regions we will cover urban centres in Europe, Arab World and India (The detailed discussed on urbanism and towns in medieval India has been provided in Unit 20 of Block 4 of MHI-05). We will also discuss the lay out of towns, their economic role, the social classes and the relationship of towns with the rural hinterland.

Let us begin with an attempt to provide a definition of towns.

33.2 URBAN CENTRES: QUESTION OF DEFINITION

Since 1960s we see a veritable explosion of research about the phenomenon of urbanism and in particular on the history of towns. These researches have provided a lot of insight in understanding the process of urbanisation in medieval period in general in Europe and specifically in France and Great Britain. In India also a number of researches have brought to light a lot of material on urban history.

It is very difficult to define a town on the basis of extent of area under habitation or large size of population or any one particular function because there is a lot of variations in size, population or the background of its rise and the nature of functions it performed. However, broadly speaking, the town generally was a human settlement bigger in area than a village (in general not always), having developed crafts, established markets and an administrative set up which was different from a rural settlement. Major segment of its population was engaged in professions other than agriculture and was dependent for its food supply and provisions on its hinterland of villages.

In different historical and geographical contexts a town or a city has many facets just as society has many complex facets of individuals. The town is not merely a diachronic assemblage of buildings. It has a structure and is a centre of different kind of social and economic relations. The characteristics of a city are formed by these socio-economic relations. They originated and were shaped by such relations.

We need to know that the modern cities like London, New York, Bombay and Beijing are not like medieval cities –Venice, Paris, London, Surat and Agra etc. and the medieval towns were not like ancient cities –Athens, Rome, Alexandria, Patliputra, Kashi etc. All these cities and towns were and are different in space, time and formations. As students of urban history,

we must understand that the word 'town' or 'city', as a conceptual entity, has been changing over times. Despite these differences in time and space, urban social formations, of whatever type, served certain social and economic purposes at a given point of time. Functionally, the urban areas may be classified into administrative, religious, military, commercial and cultural centres. Any particular city may fulfil any one of these functions or any combination thereof. Needless to say, such a classification simply emphasises the origin of a particular town, therefore, such classification should not be treated as water tight since many towns, once established, performed a variety of functions simultaneously. Nonetheless, this classification at least reflects the stress on the most pronounced character of a particular town in the process of its emergence and growth. At any rate, the sustenance and growth of a town depended largely on the multifarious activities it could perform in the long run.

A town is certainly a part of some realities and processes, certain repeated and regular characteristics. In most of the times, division of labour was one of the dominant features of a town. Market is an integral part of the town and no regional or national markets can be without the towns. The inhabitants of the city or town always get their food supply and other items of consumption through the market, the town in other words generalises the market into a widespread phenomenon. Moreover the market provides the imperative dividing-line running through the middle of societies and economics. "Wherever there are towns", F. Braudel, points out, "there will be a form of power, protective and coercive, whatever the shape taken by that power or the social group identified with it. And while power may exist independently of towns, it acquires through them an extra dimension, a different field of application. Last of all, there can be no door to the rest of the world, no international trade without towns."(op. cit., p. 481)

Our attempt of defining a town in this section must have given an impression that all towns irrespective of time and space were the same, but all towns are not alike. But all of them had some basic features. All of them had a continuous dialogue with their rural surroundings, a prime necessity of everyday life; the supply of provisions and manpower. Most of them were located at the center of communications networks large and small. They had certain kind of relationships with their suburbs and with other cities and towns. Some towns were dominant, others subordinate. All were related to each other forming a sort of hierarchy. They all had a social and cultural ethos peculiar to society they existing in.

33.3 TOWNS THROUGH THE HISTORY

Urbanisation in Greek and Roman Civilisation was an important economic and cultural aspect of the ancient society. Towns had prospered and proliferated in the Greco-Roman world. The towns were open to the surrounding countryside and were on terms of equality with it. Athens accepted inside its walls as rightful citizens the Eupatrid horse-breeders as well as the vine-growing peasants. The peasant regularly attended the Assembly of people in towns and participated in deliberations among his equals. At the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, the entire population of the Attic countryside evacuated itself to Athens where it took refuge while

the Spartans ravaged the fields, olive groves and houses. When the Spartans fell back at the approach of winter, the country people returned to their homes. The Greek city was in fact the sum of the town and its surrounding countryside. And this was the case because the towns had only just come into existence, only recently emerged from the rural background.

In Roman civilisation the patricians were concentrated in the city of Rome or in the principal Italian towns. The big landowners were absentee landlords who resided in Rome or in prominent urban centres. Their wealth followed into these cities. Mediterranean sea was a geographical centre of the Roman trade and all major towns were located on the coastline. Roman trade was boosted through the Mediterranean sea because it was unified during the Roman empire. Ostia was an important port town situated near Rome at the mouth of the Tiber. Ostia developed into a major port with traffic from all over the Mediterranean converging upon it. Paris, Trier and Mainz were a few notable frontier towns which had grown out of military garrison.

As soon as the latifundists withdrew to the countryside, the ruralisation of Western part of Roman Empire began and the rural centres of this part declined. This did not happen in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Towns and some amount of trade survived in this region of the empire. The three biggest cities of Roman empire were Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Of these two were situated in the east-Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria. Alexandria was perhaps the greatest port of the Greco-Roman world, surpassing even Ostia in terms of its economic importance. Both Alexandria and Antioch continued to prosper for long after the decline of Rome. Another important city of this region was Constantinople the capital of Roman Empire of the East. It had become prominent in the fourth century A.D.

In South Asia, the earliest known civilisation was essentially urban. The towns of Mohanjodaro and Harappa seem to have planned urban settlements with a layout superior to many a medieval townships in the region. After a long gap we again come across emergence of towns of substantial size around the 6th century BC.

From 600 BC – 500 A.D. the genesis and growth of towns was not uniform in Ancient India and this gave them diverse features. Some grew as political and administrative centres. Many of them were the seats of power or capitals of kingdoms, such as Rajagriha in Magadha, Shravasti in Kosala, Kaushambi in Vatsa, Champa in Anga and Ahichatra in Panchala. Few grew at trade routes such as Ujjain and few were sacred centres as Vaishali and Kashi. Excavation at sites such as Vaishali, Ujjain, Shravasti, Rajghat and Rajagriha date urban beginning to the mid of first millennium BC.

The towns of this era were enclosed by a moat or rampart and were sometimes fortified. Since many towns were located on river banks the rampart would have been a protection against flood, as well as providing a minimal defence against attacks and raids. The houses were better built and, in the later stages, were of mud brick with some limited use of baked bricks. Drains, ring wells and soakage pits were better built than the Harappan cities. Houses at Bhur Mound (Taxila) consisted of rooms built round a courtyard, and this was the prototype house-plan for many towns in India.

Literary sources explain rise of early urbanisation in two ways. Few villages were as the village of blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, weavers, basket-weavers and so on. Such villages were situated near the sources of raw material and linked to routes and markets. Specialised craftsmen tended to congregate because this facilitated access to resources and distributions of the craft production. Such places could evolve into a town and towns in turn expanded their production and their markets to become commercial centres. Vaishali, Shravasti, Champa, Kashi and Kaushambi were such market centres in the Gangetic plain. But Ujjain, Taxila and Bharukaccha (Baruch) had wider geographical and economic reach.

Hierarchy of settlements was a symbol of urbanisation. The *grama* (village) was the smallest unit of settlement. Places were known as *nigama* and as *Pataligrama*, and *Shringaverapura*, were the centres of exchange. *Nagars* were small towns and *mahanagars* were bigger and prosperous towns.

In later Gupta period there was decay in urban centres in Ancient India because of the emergence of feudal features. During this period (after 500 A.D.) the towns not only declined, but many suffered a visible termination of commerce. Maritime trade continued in the peninsular region but at a much reduced scale. The Hun invasion of the Roman Empire would have disturbed the commercial circuits, not only in the areas beyond north-western India but in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. All these developments were responsible for the urban decline in northern-Ancient India.

Towns of Arab and Islamic World

Towns were of prime importance in Islam: Prophet Muhammad lived and propagated his message in the urban centre of Mecca. In those days Mecca was a prosperous town of Arab World. It had caravan links with distant, foreign cities, and was an important centre of large-scale trade. At all events, the approval to trade as a profession indicate the important position urbanism occupied. The centres of faith, in those days of Islam, were located mostly in the towns, in a way that recalls the beginnings of the Christian church in the West.

Trade-routes were of great significance for the Islamic world and its civilisation. For centuries, Arabs occupied dominant positions due to these trade-routes. For substantially long period Sudanese gold and black slaves were exported by Arabs to the Mediterranean countries. Silk, pepper, spices and pearls were also exported to Europe by the Arabs from South Asia. In Asia and Africa, it controlled trade with the Levant. Only from Alexandria, Aleppo, Beirut and Tripoli did Italian merchants take over. Islam was therefore above all a civilisation based on movement and transit. This meant long sea voyages and multiple caravan routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, from Black Sea to China and India, and to North Africa.

Long sea voyages, multiple caravans and long trade-routes were not feasible without sizable towns. The towns flourished in Islam, and were the motors which made possible the circulation of people, money and goods. Everything passed through the network of towns, merchandise, pack animals, people and rare acquisitions. Its cultural and intellectual world was located in towns. Even India experienced substantial urban expansion under the Sultanate and subsequently during the Mughal rule.

Towns had prospered and proliferated in the Greco-Roman World, but the decline of the empire brought with it their ruin. Only such urban centres survived, whose role was simply that of headquarters of religious and military administrations.

In the seventh century, the Mediterranean world was split in two, and the impoverished European half tied itself more closely to the northern part of the subcontinent. Under the aegies of a common religious creed, Europe emerged in embryo. It was a poor and primitive Europe, a Europe made up of numberless rural microcosms the feudal estates, largely self-sufficient, whose autarchy was in past the consequences of the decline of trade and to a large extent its cause as well.

33.4 URBANISATION IN MEDIEVAL PERIOD

During the medieval period there is a revival of urbanism in most of the regions. The proliferation of urban centres is most remarkable in Europe and Asia. The most significant aspect of the medieval towns is the continuity of the settlements at particular sites and their gradual growth in terms of number of inhabitants, the area of its spread, institutions of towns, the craft production and commercial activities. The medieval towns played a key role in the transition of medieval societies into the modern world. This is most evident in case of Europe where the towns heralded the industrial revolution and became centres of communication network.

The emergence of towns in the later medieval Europe is matter of some controversy. It has been suggested by few historians that medieval town was survivals of older Roman cities. But it is true that one or two of the larger towns probably maintained some continuity of institutions throughout the period of nomadic devastations. But this theory of continuity seems manifestly inadequate. As we have already pointed out that the most of the Roman towns had disappeared in the Dark Ages and the institutions and the modes of life of Roman style completely discontinued in the early medieval age.

It is generally believed that in the Western Europe the growth of trade and markets prepared the ground for the growth of such forces which weakened and supplant feudalism. The process can largely be identified with the rise of towns in 11th – 14th centuries. Since the rise of urban centres was linked to the decay of feudalism in Europe. Few historians argue that the towns of this period had a purely rural origin. According to this argument, the towns grew up within the structure of feudal society, its inhabitants retained certain relationships of dependence to an overlord; and qualification for citizenship remained essentially agricultural trade became main occupation of the inhabitants only at a later stage. The only dividing line between earlier village and later town was in the fortification of the place at certain date with a wall for the protection of its inhabitants.

Henery Pirenne gives a different argument for origin of medieval towns. He pointed out that towns originated in settlements of merchants' caravans. Traders, at first were itinerant peddlers travelling between the various fairs or from one feudal household to another often in caravans for mutual protection. They were like the hawkers and peddlers of the present day. For settlement they might select the site of an old Roman town, by reason of its favourable situation

at the junction of Roman roads, or they might choose the protecting walls of some feudal castles. Such settlements were also being protected by the kings and knights on some money-payment. At some state of these developments the loose association of caravan days probably assumed the more formal dignity of guild. The guild tended to claim not only immunity from feudal jurisdiction but also a measure of control over local trade.

Few English towns originated on a ford or near the estuary of a river which caused them to become centres of trade. Manchester grew out of a village and seems to have remained consistently agricultural and non-commercial in character for some time even after it had secured the status of a borough. Cambridge apparently emerged from a group of villages and was situated close to an older castle and camp, but its position on a ford was no doubt responsible for its later growth, same was the case also with Oxford.

Pirenne also gives another reason for the survival of towns after their decline between the eight and the tenth centuries. According to him, the governing factor was the resurgence of maritime commerce in the Mediterranean, with its consequent stimulus to the movement of transcontinental trading carvans, and in turn to local settlements of traders. The seaborne trade had been earlier interrupted by the Islamic invasions; but in the eleventh century the old trade route was opened with the east. The Crusades of $11^{th} – 12^{th}$ centuries created favourable conditions for the emergence of commerce and trade in the Mediterranean sea. In this way a revival of Mediterranean commerce played an important role in reviving transcontinental trade and hence urban life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

It is quite difficult to find out extent of urbanisation or work out the ratio of urban inhabitants in the total population of medieval period. Another important point which lacks any consensus is the size of a town. Can one fix a minimum limit to the number of inhabitants to classify a habitat as a town or city. Both the issues have been matters of debate among the scholars.

We have references to towns in Europe whose population estimates vary from a few hundred to couple of hundred thousands. While in France the official figures considered a minimum population of 2000 to be counted as a town. While in England a population of 5000 was more acceptable. According to Braudel (*Structures of Everyday Life, pp 483-84)* if 5000 is taken as minimum definition around 13% population lived in towns in England in 1700, 16% in 1750 and 25% in 1801. If 400 was to be taken as a figure then 10% was living in 1500 and 25% in 1700. Braudel has given some other estimates such as Germany – 10% in 1500 and around the same for America in 1700; Japan in 1750 around 22%; the highest was perhaps in Holland 51% in 1515, 59% in 1627, 65% in 1797; the lowest in Russia around 2.5% in 1630, 3% in 1724 and 4% in 1796. In case of India in around 1593 it is mentioned that there are around 120 big cities and 3200 small towns or *qasbas* (Nizamuddin Ahmad, *Tabqat I Akbari*). Irfan Habib estimates that around 15% of the total population in Mughal India lived in towns. It indicates a high degree of urbanisation in late 16th and 17th centuries. In Islamic World towns like Mecca, Jeddah, Baghdad and Cairo were known as large centres of splendour and wealth. Ibn Battuta (14th century) refers to Cairo as having 1200 water carriers. The level of urbanisation in China was also substantial Braudel points out well defined hierarchies of towns for which suffix *fu, chu* and *hien* was used to indicate the

descending size of towns. There were in addition the 4th category of elementary towns.

The growth of towns in Europe was remarkable. We have population estimates of more than fifty towns in 16th - 17th centuries which had a population of more than 40000 inhabitants (Annexure -1). Out of these around 12 towns had a population of more than a hundred thousand and 3 towns had a population of more than 4 hundred thousand around the end of 17th century. The town of London which had a population of less than 60,000 in early 16th century grew to around 2 hundred thousand around the early 17th century and crossed 4 hundred thousand by the end of the century. In 17th century India, it is estimated that seven towns had a population exceeding a hundred thousand. Cities like Lahore, Agra and Delhi are estimated to have more than five hundred thousand inhabitants (Annexure-2) which is more than any contemporary European city.

33.5 UNDERSTANDING MEDIEVAL TOWNS

The towns through the history represented a different economic, political, social and cultural environment than the countryside or rural areas. Here we will discuss the features that gave pre-modern towns of Europe and Asia a distinct identity

The towns of Asia and Europe were certainly different from each other in their physical and socio-economic appearances in medieval age, we therefore will discuss them separately

Europe

West European towns were based on their corporate, communal organisation as a capitalist nucleus with the capacity to act as the solvent of feudal social relations. Thus capitalism and towns were basically the same thing in the west. The European towns' corporate autonomy and the relative openness of their communal structure allowed them to develop as autonomous world according to their own propensities. According to Pirenne's enormously influential studies of medieval towns and commerce, the closing of the Mediterranean trade routes was the key to the substitution of an agrarian economy in the 7th - 9th centuries: "for an economy of change was substituted by an economy of consumption. Each demesne constituted from this time on a little world of its own – a closed domestic economy – of no markets. They did not sell, because markets were wanting. Conversely, the reopening of long distance trade from the 11th century the counter-attack of Christianity against Islam-revived towns and markets (Italy, Flanders) and broke down the rigid confines of demesnial system. As in antiquity the country oriented itself afresh on the city. But in this case the division of labour between town and country transformed the countryside; by arousing his desires the city multiplied the peasant's needs, raised his standard of living and so caused the end of serfdom, which coincided with the increasing importance of liquid capital, urban trade drew agricultural production towards the towns, modernised it and set it free. While the Burgher's own conception of freedom was still that of a privileged order, a corporate monopoly, nonetheless to the middle class was reserved the mission of spreading the idea of liberty far and wide and of becoming, without having consciously desired to be, the means of gradual enfranchisement of the rural classes … It had not the

power to arrest an evolution of which it was the cause and which it could not suppress save itself vanishing." (*Cf.* Rodney Hilton, *Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, 1976, London, pp. 172-73) In this way the market was the only dynamic force, the principle behind all movement, all change.

Different towns possessed economic and political independence in varying degress. The influence of their presence as trading centers, especially on the smaller estates of the knights, was a profound one. This gave impetus to the money economy. The exploitative rural exactions by the lords forced the rural population to migrate from manors to towns in the declining phase of the feudal system. One must remember of many towns of this period were scarcely larger than what we should call large villages to-day. It was rare for a town to exceed 20,000 inhabitants; and in the fourteenth century cities as large as 40,000-50,000 habitants were only found in Italy and Flanders. York only had some 11,000 and Bristol 9,500 inhabitants. Even in the fifteenth century Hamburg only had some 22000. Nuremberg 20,000-25000, Ulam 20,000 and Augsburg 18,000. The urban communities of craftsmen, merchants and small traders in their early stage had dependence on feudal economy. The mode of production of urban handicrafts was also a form of simple commodity production.

Asia

Medieval towns in Asia were somewhat different from European towns. While towns of Europe managed to secure autonomy it was not so in case of towns of Islamic world. Towns in Islamic world could manage some kind of autonomy once the empires collapsed. Some towns here developed distinct character and limited autonomy. But they lasted for a short while and the main beneficiaries were only certain marginal towns like Cordoba, or the cities which were urban republics by the fifteenth century, like Ceuta before the Portuguese occupation in 1415, or Oran before the Spanish occupation in 1509. The usual pattern was the huge city under rule of Caliph: a Baghdad or Cairo. Islamic towns had neither the political liberties nor the sense of architectural order that western cities strove for once they were sufficiently developed. But the Islamic towns had all the genuine elements of town life: a growing body of traders, merchants and intelligentia, plus a mass of poorer people, artisans and daily wage earners. They enjoyed pleasures of city life and were less constrained than elsewhere. Towns in this part were also centres of education, with their schools attached to the mosques, their *madrasas***,** and their institutions of higher learning. They were centres of attraction for people from the surrounding rural areas, whom they employed and engaged as per the requirements and needs of towns. Islamic world towns had a very firm grip on the highly primitive peasantry outside the gates. Damascus controlled the peasants near the Ghouta and the mountain people of Jebel ed Druze; Algiers controlled the corsairs and the peasants of the Fahs, the Mitija and the Kabyle Mountains.

At one level these are the characteristics of all towns, Muslim and Western alike. What distinguished the Muslim towns, essentially, were their early growth and their exceptional size. The towns were the essence of Islamic civilisation. Towns, roads, ships, caravans and pilgrimages were all the part of a single whole, all as Louis Mussigron has aptly said, elements of movement, all 'lines of force' in Muslim life.

In medieval India the cities and towns had to fulfil diverse and overlapping roles. Many of them were the centres of manufacturing and marketing, banking and entrepreneurial activities. They were connected by sea and land routes to the cities of West, East and Central Asia. Smaller urban centres performed a more modest role in relation to local commerce, local resources and local consumer needs. In Mughal period many European travellers visited different cities of India and described the activity and prosperity of these urban centres in their travelogues. The cities of Mughal period were not only the centres of commerce and trade, some big cities had become prosperous because they became centres of political and administrative activities Delhi and Agra were capital cities of the empire, Patna, Burhanpur, Dacca Khandesh, Vijayanagar, Lahore, Thatta etc. were regionally important cities and most of them were provincial capitals of administration. Benaras, Nasik and Ajmer were pilgrimage and sacred centres of the Medieval India. These cities of Mughal empire were the repositories of higher culture and learning and they were also the symbol of Samskirtic and Indo-Islamic 'Great Traditions' and through them these traditions could be transmitted to society as a whole.

But the towns of India and China were *incapable* of taking over the artisanal trades from the countryside. They were both the open towns and subject towns simultaneously. Besides, in India as in China already existing social structures hampered the free movement to the towns.

In India, the caste system automatically divided and broke up every urban community. In China, the cult of *gentus* on the one had was confronted on the other by a mixture comparable to that which created the Western town: like the latter it acted as a melting-pot, breaking old bonds and placing the individual on the same level.

Physical Layout of Towns

We have a lot of evidence to suggest that medieval towns in all parts of Europe and Asia were enclosed by walls with ramparts. Towns in Europe, China, India and the Islamic World had slightly different heights and size of walls depending on the perception of threat or need for protection. The need for wall was to define the boundaries of the town and provide protection not only from outside attack but also from undesirable intruders and trespassers. The only exceptions where protective wall was not erected were some island towns, Japanese archipelago or towns like Venice (surrounded by water). A number of gates were built at places to provide an access to the city and regulate the entry of visitors. In almost all the cases the gates were placed under the guards by the administration. According to Braudel:

> "the West had three basic types of town in the course of its evolution: Open towns, that is to say not differentiated from their hinterland, even blending into it (A); towns closed in on themselves in every sense, their walls marking the boundaries of an individual way of life more than a territory (B); finally towns held in subjections, by which is meant the whole range of known controls by prince or state (C).

> Roughly, A Preceded B, and B preceded C. But there is no suggestion of strict succession about the order. It is rather a question

of directions and dimensions shaping the complicated careers of the Western towns. They did not all develop at the same time or in the same way." (*The structures of Everyday Life,* p. 515).

In many cases different parts of the town were clearly divided into areas for residential purpose, for market, government offices and courts etc. In most of early European cities the plans were not clearly marked and growth unplanned. Because of the periodic growth and migrations the requirements of residential and business areas kept increasing and towns expanding from a given point. The over-crowding in all large cities resulted in narrow streets, small dwellings and constantly widening boundaries. In many cities one can trace old city walls and its subsequent expansion which again had a wall. Generally the centre of the city was hub of activities for business and official establishments. The craftsmen and producers were often at the periphery of towns.

The towns of Islamic world had a lot of similarity. The streets of Islamic towns were narrow and generally sloping, so as to be washed automatically by the rain. A saying of the Prophet prescribed that streets should be seven cubits wide (between ten and thirteen feet), permitting two laden asses to pass each other. Towns like Cairo, Mecca and its port Jedda had multi-storey buildings. The administration of a town was not run by the municipality or any elected body, but by the officials of the king. A French traveller Volney in 1782 gave the following description of Cairo town:

> "Since they are not paved, the masses of people, camels, asses and dogs which crowd into them kick up a disagreeable dust. Frequently, people throw in front of their doors, and the dust gives way to mud and malodorous fumes. Contrary to normal custom in the East, the houses are two or three storeys tall, toped by a paved or loamed terrace. Most of them are built of mud or badly fired brick, the rest are made from soft stone from the nearby Mt Moqattam. All of them look like prisons, because they have no windows on to the street". (F. Braudel, *A History of Civilizations,* Paris, *1993, p.65)*

Important part of the town was built in a planned manner. At the centre of the town was the Great Mosque for the weekly sermon. Nearby was the bazaar, i.e. the merchants' quarter with its streets of shops and its caravanserai's or warehouses, as well as the public baths. Artisans and shops were grouped in some sort of order starting from the Great Mosque, first, the makers and sellers of perfumes and incense, then the shops selling fabrics, the jewellers and food stores, and finally the humblest trades-curriers, cobblers, blacksmiths, potters, dyres. Their shops marked the edges of towns. In principles, each of these trades had its location fixed for all times. Prince's quarter was in principle located on the outskirts of the city, well away from riots or popular revolts. The towns were often confined within walls with grandiose gateways, and surrounded by huge cemeteries.

In case of India most of the towns were enclosed with protective walls and guarded gates. There were separate markets for specific commodities like grain, cloth, iron objects etc. However in many towns such divisions were not neat and shops were to be found on both sides of the main road. Shopkeepers would live above or behind the shops. Many a residential areas had professional or caste groups residing in sub areas separately. The areas drew their names

from the dominant groups of inhabitants. Another significant features of these towns was the presence of *sarais* (resting and living places) for travellers and businessmen. (For details of urbanisation and towns in India see our course MHI-05, Block 4).

33.6 RELATIONS OF TOWNS WITH THE COUNTRYSIDE

The town and countryside had a reciprocal relationship – one supplementing and complimenting the other and following the rules of co-existence.

In reality town and countryside were never separate like oil and water. They separated for some time and again joined. Even in Islamic countries the town cannot ignore or exclude the countryside, despite the apparently sharp divide between the two. A similar pattern of town development was followed in China where the countryside was fertilized with refuse and rubbish from the town.

In fact the town was always dependent for its food supply on the countryside in immediate vicinity. It could have recourse to long-distance trade only in exceptional circumstances and only if it was a privileged city like Florence, Venice, Naples, Rome, Peking, Istanbul, Delhi and Mecca.

Many big towns had their share of rural activities up to the eighteenth century. Shepherds, gamekeepers, agricultural workers and vine-growers had their house even in Paris. Every town generally owned surrounding area of gardens, fields and orchards inside and outside its walls.

Innumerable small towns of Europe and *qusbas* of north India were the same as the big villages. They had some characteristics of the countryside. The term 'rural town' was used for them. All the same, Weinsberg, Heilbronn, Stuttgart and Esslinzen in vine growing lower Swabia took it upon themselves to send the wine they produced to the Danube and wine was an industry in itself.

During the harvesting season many inhabitants of the town left their residence, particularly artisans and urban labourers to go to their villages for harvesting. It was true of England, even on the eve of industrial revolution; and of Florence where very important harvesting work was to be undertaken chiefly in winter in the sixteenth century.

Things were the same in 1772, when a treatise on economy deplores the fact that instead of peasants, artisans were concerning themselves with agriculture in the small towns and princedoms in Germany. It would be better if everyone kept in his own station. Towns would be cleaner and healthier if they were cleared of livestock and their piles of dung. The solution would be to ban all farming in the towns, and to put it in the hands of those suited for it. Craftsmen would be able to sell goods to peasants, peasants would be sure of selling the regular equivalent to townspeople, and everyone would be better off.

The Indian villages were to some extent self-sufficient, but the village community had a relationship with the towns. The villagers had to sell their products in the town markets and *qusbas* for money and they had to purchase iron tools, salt and spices from the markets of the town. Many village artisans gave up their villages for settling in the towns. Most of the landlords and *jagirdars* were staying in the towns and *qasbas* which were surrounded by the countryside. In

China, the country craftsman supplemented his hard life by work in silk or cotton. His low standard of living made him a formidable competitor for the town craftsman. An English traveller (1793) registered surprise and delight at the unwanted sight of peasant women near Peking breeding silk worms and spinning cotton, "which is in general use for both sexes of the people, but the women are almost the sole weavers throughout the Empire".

The towns and countryside not only had reciprocal relationships with each other, they had also contradictory relationships. The medieval urban society grew and developed in sharp contrast to the surrounding countryside. This phenomenon has been already pointed out in this Unit. The walls of the town had a practical purpose but also a symbolic significance; they represented the boundary between two cultures in conflict. It was this conflict which gave to the medieval city its definite character and made the urban movement of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries the turning point of world history.

33.7 MEDIEVAL TOWNS: ADMINISTRATION, ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The rapid urbanism during the medieval period had a big impact on the administration, economy and society. The changes in both these spheres had long term consequences and to certain extent led the way to the transition to the Modern World. Here we will give a brief account of the impact of rise of towns in a few select areas only.

The peasant who left his village and arrived in the town was immediately other man. Although he had left hated feudalism to become a freeman but this mattered little. If the town adopted him, he could go back to his lord when his lord called for him. Though it was obsolete elsewhere, such calls were still frequently to be heard in Silesia in the eighteenth century and in Moscow up to the nineteenth.

Although the towns of medieval Europe were more open, but only the rich of the cities had citizen rights in Europe. The nobles of Venice remained a closed class for centuries. There were two categories of citizens – full citizens and ordinary citizens in Venice. Fifteen years of residence were still required to be allowed to apply for the first, twenty five years for the second. A decree by the senate of Venice in 1386 even forbade new citizens from trading directly in Venice with German merchants. The ordinary towns people were also hostile to newcomers. In June 1520, the street people attacked the peasants who had arrived from the main land as recruits for the army, crying 'Back to plough, shirkers!'.

Venice was an extreme example, because its aristocracy and constitution were extremely reactionary. But the limited conception of citizenship was everywhere in existence.

The industry and craft, privileges and profits, in fact, belonged to the town, to its authorities and to its merchant entrepreneurs. The guild of merchants could deprive the rural areas of the city of the right to spin, weave and dye, or if on the contrary it would be advantageous to grant it these rights. Everything was possible in these interchanges, as the history of each individual town shows.

As we have earlier pointed out the guilds of merchants (oligarchy of merchants)

had complete control over the administration and trade of the town. And the city of London was a telling example of guilds' domination even in eighteenth century. If Westminster and suburbs of London were growing continually, noted an economist (1754), it was for obvious reason, "These suburbs are free and present a clear field for every industrious citizen, while in its bosom London nourishes ninety-two of all sorts of those exclusive companies (guilds), whose numerous members can be seen adorning the Lord Mayor's show every year with immoderate pomp."

After a prolonged struggle which was fought between the town communities and feudal lords in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Western Europe, the towns of medieval Europe succeeded in achieving autonomy from the feudal authority. In 1327 at Burg (England) the townsmen made forcible entry into the monastery and carried off the Abbot and monks to imprisonment until they allowed the grant of a guild merchant – In the same year at Abingdon (England) a crowd, swollen by allies from Oxford, laid siege to the abbey and burned down its gates. The great Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England was actively supported by the urban elements. Through such struggles, the towns of Europe particularly of England acquired partial or complete autonomy from the feudal domination.

In large cities of medieval Europe merchant community was a dominant one, but there were a number of older aristocratic families who were owners of land in the city and its neighbourhood. These represented an element of feudal society that continued to survive inside the new urban society. In many Italian cities these feudal families did not only control the urban government, but also dominated the neighbouring countryside. With the support of the countryside, they converted the urban centre into feudal-commercial republics. In the twelfth century, the five aristocratic families controlled Genoese trade.

In some English towns we find superior and inferior categories of burghers at an early date. At many towns of England – Winchester, Huntingdon, Norwich and Derby the poor burghers who dwelt outside the walls were evidently treated as being of inferior status. Prior to the fourteenth century the social inequalities were not very sharp in England. Big traders, merchants, craftsmen and retail trader all were members of Merchant Guild – an association of urban traders and craftsmen. Among the craftsmen there would have been little differentiation between master and journeymen in economic and social terms. The journeymen did work with his master in the workshop and often ate at latter's table. He was like a companion-worker and it was impossible to find any distinction of status between a trader, a master and journeymen in the early guilds. The differentiation in most cases inside the urban community was very little. In the course of time, as the town grew in population and in territory, the original owners of urban land enriched themselves from sales of lands or from leasers at a high rent. And it was an important source of capital accumulation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

There were two radical changes in the process of crafts production and in trading process in thirteenth, fourteenth centuries. First, a specifically trading element, particularly in England, drawn from the more well to do craftsmen, separated itself from production and formed exclusive trading organisations which monopolised some specific sphere of wholesale trade. Secondly, these new trading organisations very soon came to dominate the town government

and to use their political power to further their own privileges and to subordinate the craftsmen. In majority of cases in the 14th century it was quite evident that the concentration of power in the towns represented the rule of merchant capital. It managed to restrict the crafts to trading retail in the local market, and here the local market was not the main outlet for their products. It subordinated the craftsmen to merchants with whom and on whose terms the producers had to deal.

The increased agricultural production (as a result of improved plough, new harness, use of horse for ploughing and two/three crop rotation) the countryside could spare sections of rural population from agriculture and made them available for engaging in craft production in towns. The increased rural produce of grain, poultry products, wines, wool and yarn had a demand and ready market in towns. The growing commercial activities gave an impetus to growth of craft production. Now the towns, which to begin with were centres of exchange, grew into the centres of production.

In Europe Guilds as organisation of craftsmen and merchants strengthened and dominated the urban economy and governance. A new spirit of enterprise and initiative swept through the towns. The period is seen as the age of big merchants who were indispensable to industrial revolution. Large scale construction activities were undertaken to meet the growing demand for habitations, business, industry and governance. They gave a distinct physical character to towns common to almost all parts of Europe.

The methods of governance underwent changes. A large set of regulations also came into use regulating the social and business transactions and lives of people. A few important ones were: i) Standardisation of weights and measures and strict implementation of these adopted by each town had its unique feature and carried the seal of its guarantee; ii) Towns came to have their own autonomy with restrictions on entry and stay within its limits. In many towns outsiders were to stay at designated places and even register themselves, iii) Taking up any profession or practicing of craft was regulated and required official permission, iv) Taxes on crafts and business were to be decided by the towns and not the king, v) The working hours for market and business as also for workmen were to be dictated. Even the days of the week were decided for specified business dealings or holding markets. The timings and days for courts and institutions of governance were also accordingly adopted. The earlier concept of church having the bells for timing as per their requirement was completely replaced with the concept of dividing time into fixed and equal proportions to suit the needs of towns. This gave rise to the making of new clocks and watches (14th century), vi) The constructions of homes or shops were also subjected to regulations and in most of the cases prior authorisation was required.

The towns evolved through a process of economic, social and cultural synthesis and came to acquire a distinct character. At the same time they also retained some of the social and cultural features of the settlers. The towns attracted people, depending on their size, from a given region, far off places or even different nationalities. The immigrants in many a cases brought with them their folklore, traditions, customs and festivals. They formed their own communities. However in towns they adopted a new social life where now instead of clan the family and household was the anchor of life and new social ties evolved. Towns

attracted the practioners of faith and became centres of religious preaching. In 13th century Humbert of Romans (Master General of Dominicians) listed three reasons why Friars (monastic order) should choose towns for their preaching. Jacques Le Goff quotes and analyses these as follows:

1) Preaching was quantitatively more effective in towns, for there were more people there. This underlines the role of the towns in helping men grasp the idea of quantity, that interest in figures which meant that at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the middle ages entered the statistical era.

2) Preaching was qualitatively more necessary in towns, for morals were worse there (*ibi sunt plura peccata).* This belief in the immorality of the cities is the other side of the coin stamped with their civilising mission.

3) Through the towns you influence the countryside, for the country emulates the town. This is a remarkable expression of the role of the towns as producers of cultural models which they exported to the countryside.

(*The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Middle Ages, 1981, p.78)*

The great importance assigned to towns by the church is quite evident from the fact that large number of cathedrals and prominent churches were established in them. Albert the Great in a sermon at Augsburg (1257 or 1263) commented "The doctors of the faith have been called a city; this is because like a city they give security, urbanity, unity and liberty" (*Fontana Economic History* op. cit. p. 79).

The towns during this period emerged as great centres of knowledge replacing monasteries. A number of schools and universities were established. According to Giovanni Villani, at Florence in 1338 there were 8000 to 10000 boys and girls learning to read and six mathematical schools where 1000 to 1200 pupils were learning commercial usage before going on to a practical stage with a merchant. (cf. *Fontanta, op.cit*, p.85). Now the teaching from world of month gave way to teaching through books. The book, to begin with was expensive but from 15th century the printing technology made the book universally accessible and brought it within the reach of common people. A new intellectual elite and a new aristocracy came into being. They were the educated graduates coming out of the universities and were ready to replace nobility of birth or blood. New educated class combined with scientific development and growth of arts, literature, and new ideas flourished in the new opportunities provided by the towns. By the end of medieval period towns completely dominated the social, cultural, political and economic life of the age.

The political and social victory of the urban middle class, and of its peculiar sets of values, had revolutionary consequences in economics. But this was not the case with the towns of Islamic world, India and China where the middle class could not emerge in a revolutionary fashion and the cities of medieval Asia were not autonomous politically, socially and economically. They were ruled and dominated by the feudal rulers of these countries. They could not give a lead to modern social, political and economic transformation.

With the appearance of the medieval city and the emergence of the urban bourgeoisie, a new Europe was to born. Every aspect of socio-economic life

was transformed. The urban revolution of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the prelude to, and created necessary conditions for the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century.

33.8   SUMMARY

Urbanism played a very important role not only in Europe but in other parts of medieval world also. The rise of towns and cities had been significant in different societies in all periods through the history but the urbanism of the medieval period was quite different than the earlier phases of urbanism. The urbanism of medieval period had remarkable continuity in the process of transition to the modern world. It gave rise to a number of significant administrative, social and economic institutions.

You must have noticed that during medieval period number of urban centres increased, their physical size and population grew at a faster pace especially during the 16th and 17th centuries. The physical lay out of towns with enclosed walls and gates separating them from the countryside are common to both European and Asian townships. Culturally urban centres were quite different from the surrounding countryside. The cities and towns of Europe enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy as compared to their counterparts in Asia. Inspite of physical separation from the countryside there was a lot of economic and social interaction between the towns and rural areas. The economy and society represented by towns dominated the societies they were located in. They emerged especially in Europe as the main centres which led the way for the transition to modern world.

33.9   EXERCISES

1)   Define an urban centre in around 150 words.

2)   Give a brief history of Urbanisation.

3)   Write a note on the growth of towns in Europe during medieval period.

4)   Compare the towns of Europe with Asia.

5)   Write a short note on towns as centres of trade and commerce.

6)   Discuss the main features of society, economy and administration of medieval towns in Europe.

EUROPEAN TOWNS OF MORE THAN 40,000 INHABITANTS IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

Categories	Early 16th Century	End of 16th – Early 17th Century	End of 17th Century
More than 400,000			London, Paris Constantinople
200-400,000		Constantinople Naples, Paris	Naples
150-200,000	Constantinople Paris, Naples	London, Milan, Venice	Amsterdam
100-150,000	Venice, Milan	Rome, Seville, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Palermo, Antwerp(1560)	Moscow, Rome, Venice, Milan, Madrid, Vienna, Palermo
60-100,000	Cordoba, Seville, Grenada, Florence, Genoa	Messina, Florence, Genoa, Bologna, Grenada, Valencia, Madrid, Lyons, Rouen, Moscow(?)	Florence, Genoa, Bologna, Seville, Lisbon, Valencia, Lyons, Marseilles, Rouen, Toulouse, Brussels, Antwerp, Hamburg, Berlin
40-60,000	Valencia, Lisbon, Barcelona, Palermo, Bologna, Rome, Brescia, Cremona, Lyons, Rouen	Cordoba, Barcelona, Valladolid, Verona, Cremona, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Ghent, Brussels,	Barcelona, Cordoba, Grenada, Messina, Turin, Verona, Lille, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Montpellier(?)
40-60,000	Toulouse, Ghent, Antwerp, London, Augsburg, Cologne	Bruges, Leyden, Haarlem, Hemburg, Danzig, Augsburg, Vienna, Prague, Nuremberg, Cologne	Amiens (?), Dublin (?), Ghent, Liege, Leyden, Haarlem, Danzig, Breslau, Prague, Cologne, Copenhagen, Stockholm

Source: Table reproduced from Carlo M. Cipolla (Ed.), *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,* pp. 42-43.)

Note: The question marks at some towns have been put in case the figure is doubtful.

POPULATION ESTIMATES OF INDIAN TOWNS:
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Towns	Year of Estimate	Population
Agra	1609	5,00,000
	1629-43	6,66,000
	1666	8,00,000
Delhi	1659-66	5,00,000
Lahore	1581 and 1615	4,00,000
		7,00,000
Ahmedabad	1613	1,00,000
		2,00,000
Surat	1763	1,00,000
	1600	2,00,000
Patna	1631	2,00,000
Decca	c1630	2,00,000

Source: Tapan Rai Chaudhuri and Irfan Habib, *The Cambridge Economic History of India,*
Vol.1, p. 171