SECTION I
PRE-1901 URBANISATION
CHAPTER I

PRE-1901 URBANISATION

Before attempting an analysis of the patterns and trends in urbanisation during the current century, it was considered necessary to trace the process of Indian urbanisation through history. From geographical viewpoint, this amounted to identification of areas of urban concentration during different periods of Indian history, examination of the changes in spatial patterns of urbanisation, and investigation of factors behind these temporal-spatial patterns. Any such effort was, however, seriously handicapped by non-availability of necessary data and lack of requisite information. The discussion had to depend upon whatever sketchy historical material could be obtained from various sources. The help taken from the Imperial Gazetteers of India¹, running into twenty six volumes, deserves a special mention. These gazetteers provide, among other things, a brief description of each and every place of some historical importance. Such places can be treated as urban in character. All the places described in the gazetteers were noted and classified into three groups on the basis of the period of their origin: (i) towns that originated during ancient period, from the earliest times to 1206 A.D., (ii)

towns that originated during medieval period, 1206 to 1761 A.D., and (iii) towns that originated during the early modern period, from 1761 A.D. to the close of the nineteenth century. This threefold periodization of the Indian history was in line with the scheme adopted by the compilers of the latest issue of the Gazetteer of India.²

Three separate maps were prepared to show the location of towns that emerged during each of the three historical periods. Two additional maps represented the distributional patterns of towns during the medieval and early modern periods. These maps gave a fair idea of the spatial patterns of urbanisation at different times in Indian history. The ensuing discussion was based on these maps supplemented by the information gathered from regional histories of various parts of India.

Ancient Period

The history of urbanisation in the Indian subcontinent goes as far back as about 2500 B.C.³ when a number of urban communities (most famous among them being Mohanjodaro and Harappa now in Pakistan) were flourishing in the Indus valley. Like the valleys of the Tigris-Euphrates and


the Nile, the fertile Indus valley experienced early urbanisation associated with the first agricultural revolution in the world based upon invention of plough and irrigation. Recent archaeological discoveries have brought to surface several of the then existing urban sites which were scattered all over the western part of the sub-continent suggesting that this urban civilization covered quite a vast area. The greater part of the country was, however, at a low level of culture and the south, central and eastern India were still in the stone age.

The great Indus civilization came to an abrupt end around 1700 B.C. reasons for which are still obscure. A kind of dark age seems to have started, followed by the Vedic age with the advent of Aryans in western India from central Asia around 1400 B.C. The Aryans, on their first arrival, are said to have destroyed many of the then existing

5 *The Gazetteer of India*, op. cit., p. 18.
6 *ibid.*, p. 34.
8 *The Gazetteer of India*, op. cit., p. 21.
cities. There is a little trace of city life in the early Vedic age. Soon the Aryans settled down in village communities many of which grew into urban centres. Towns showed a concentration in the Kurukshetra region or the Sarasvati-Yamuna interfluve located to the east of the Indus valley. New areas of urbanisation emerged further east with the movement of the Aryans in the same direction. By the close of Vedic age around sixth century B.C., a large number of urban places had emerged up to the Middle Ganga Plain. The clustering of holy places in the Ganga plain and the Kurukshetra region reflect the main foci of domain of the Vedic Aryans. Hastinapura, Indraprastha (now part of Delhi), Kurukshetra and Mathura were important cities. By comparison, south India had not experienced any urbanisation as yet (Map 2).

The time around 600 B.C. was critical in Indian history at least in two respects. It witnessed (i) the emergence of territorial states and sub-territorial units, each with its own capital and (ii) the rise of Buddhism.

11 The Gazetteer of India, op. cit., p. 43.
Both the events had a profound effect on the pattern of urbanisation. Under the new territorial structure, a city or town was generally the political centre of a state or of its subordinate territorial units. Bigger the political unit, greater was the glory of its capital. The impact of Buddhism was at least twofold. Firstly, the places associated with Buddha's life grew into big religious centres, such as Sarnath, Kapilavastu, and Bodh Gaya. Secondly, a number of Buddhist monasteries gradually developed into urban places. Nalanda was a good example. In its origin, Buddhism was largely addressed to urban class and not to rural audience.

Towns multiplied rapidly during the rule of Mauryas from 323 B.C. to 185 B.C. It was a period of political stability and economic progress. Industries, organized in guilds, became more localized and specialized in the towns. Most of the towns at that time were confined to the northern India. Urbanisation started appearing also in the Kaveri delta of South India due partly to evolution of local civilization and partly to cultural impact of Aryan migration from...
Nothing special is notable about the process of urbanisation till we reach the Gupta period (4th and 5th centuries A.D.) which is known as the golden age of Indian history. With the increasing security of life and property, there was an all round development in agriculture, industry and trade. The prosperity of the country depended more on industrial advancement, and there was a large scale trade with areas falling under the Roman Empire. As such, the industrial centres and port towns were the most flourishing. With the shift of capital from Patliputra to Ujjain, and with attachment of Ganga-like sanctity to Narmada, the focus of new urban development moved from north to central India. Under the Guptas, the Hinduism experienced a revival, and several new urban places grew around Hindu temples. Thus, urbanisation signified a higher level of industrial production, increased trade and emergence of new religious places.


24 S.M. Bhardwaj: op. cit., p. 67.

25 The Gazetteers of India, op. cit., p. 221.
A phase of stagnant urbanisation followed the fall of Gupta empire. It was a period when the Roman Empire also declined. This had an adverse effect on fortunes of trade and industry in Indian towns. The economic life of the country receded and political instability ensued for a long time till the rise of Vardhan Empire in seventh century. Things started looking up for a while with political consolidation. It was, however, a short respite and again the momentum of development was thrown in the back gear with the fall of Vardhan Empire. The re-activation of the urbanisation process had to wait till about 1000 A.D. when several Rajput Kingdoms took form, especially in western India. The Rajputs established a number of capital-fort towns.

It follows that India has been one of the early centres of urbanisation. The periods of spurts in urbanisation alternated with those of stagnation depending upon political stability, agricultural prosperity, industrial production, trade and religion. The earliest urbanisation developed in the western part of the country and it diffused to the east with the gradual migration of the Aryan civilization in that direction. Urbanisation in south India was a later development. In all probability it was a post-600 B.C. affair.

26 S. Piggott: op. cit., p. 18.
The supremacy of Rajputs declined with the coming of the Muslim Sultans in power at Delhi in 1206. This was the beginning of the medieval period of Indian history. The medieval period, which is stated to have lasted till 1761, was marked by many new developments that made distinct impact upon the process and kind of urbanisation. The most notable was the rule of Muslim Sultans and later of the Mughals who built vast empires with Delhi as their capital. The southern India witnessed the rise of the Bahamani and Vijaynagar empires which were equally stable kingdoms for centuries. It was during this period that the Europeans (the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English in that order) established themselves in India. Another notable event was the emergence of regional kingdoms of Marathas, Sikhs and Jats at the time when the Mughal empire was weakening.

The political unity and stability under the Muslims and Mughals led to a considerable revival of the country's economic life. Agriculture, trade, mining and industry got an impetus, and road and river transport was run on more organised lines. As a result, a number of new towns came into being. The Muslim and Mughal rule was, by and large, urban biased which favoured urban growth. In order to maintain their control, they required closely spaced adminis-

trative centres having urban character. They kept huge armies, established numerous posts and built many fort towns. They also had great fascination and adequate resources for building new towns, monuments, and gardens that added to the number of urban places (Map 3).

In the Mughal India, four types of towns could be discerned: (i) administrative centres with industry and commerce, called capital cities, (ii) administrative centres with trade, (iii) pilgrimage centres and (iv) places that had achieved distinction in some particular industry. The plunder and loot of Hindu temples by some of them, however, led to the decline of many a famous Hindu pilgrim places in India.

In spatial terms, northern India was more urbanised than other parts of the country (Map 4). Within it, two zones of urban concentration could be discerned. The first was the one surrounding Delhi and Agra containing a number of fort towns, and the second was the one stretching from Allahabad to Patna along the Ganga river having a number of trade-navigation-religious centres. The south India also had its own share of urbanisation, especially in the Bahamani and Vijaynagar empires. Here a number of new towns emerged on

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31 H.K. Naqvi: op. cit., p. 269.
trade points or at mining sites of diamonds, gold and other precious minerals\textsuperscript{32}.

It was the western coast that was destined to experience quick urbanisation with the arrival of the Europeans who came for trade but gradually established their colonies. Among them, the English ultimately succeeded in building a big empire\textsuperscript{33}. Since the trade was mainly with the western countries (both European and Arab), ports on the western coast started flourishing. The Europeans also built forts and factories in many of the port towns. It is notable that urbanisation associated with the arrival of Europeans developed first in India\textsuperscript{34}.

The Mughal empire started disintegrating after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. A period of confusion and insecurity followed. The process of urbanisation suffered a set back. The fall of Bahamani and Vijaynagar empires created similar conditions in south India. Simultaneously, there was the rise of Marathas, the Sikhs, and the Jats as regional powers. Involved in power struggle with Mughal rulers at Delhi, they built a number of fort towns. The

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\textsuperscript{32} W.H. Moreland: \textit{India At the Death of Akbar}, Atma Ram and Sons, Delhi, 1962, pp. 9-12.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{ibid.}, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{34} W.H. Moreland: \textit{From Akbar to Aurangzeb}, Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 30-44.
\end{flushleft}
Marathas, in particular, held sway over many parts of India. They built a number of principalities, each with its own capital having urban character. The supremacy of the Marathas was, however, shortlived as they were defeated in a crucial battle with Ahmed Shah Abdali of Afghanistan in 1761. Their defeat created a scope for a gradual consolidation of the British rule in India.\textsuperscript{35}

Thus, the medieval period of Indian history was significant from the viewpoint of urban development. Many new towns appeared as administrative, defence and trade points. The glory and grandeur of the imperial cities was well marked. The imprint of the Islamic culture on urbanisation was unmistakable.

**Early Modern Period**

With the British coming into power, a new phase of Indian history started. Trends in urbanisation also took a new turn. In the initial stage, the policies of the British proved rather harmful to the process of urbanisation. The transformation of India's economy into a colonial one - a market for the manufactures and a source for the supply of raw materials to her industries - hit hard the industrial and commercial base of a number of towns.\textsuperscript{36} Many traditional

\textsuperscript{35} G. Dunbar : *op. cit.*, pp. 44-69.

\textsuperscript{36} *The Gazetteer of India*, *op. cit.*, p. 615.
industrial and trade towns declined throughout India. The damage done to weaving industry was ubiquitously felt as this industry was diffused in towns in all parts of the country. The frequency of famines also increased under the new regime. More area was brought under cultivation of cash crops, like cotton and jute, for export purposes. This caused a decline in food production—a situation which further worsened due to exports of food even during periods of scarcity. The introduction of zamindari (absentee landlordism) system was another contributory factor to the fall in agricultural production. A famine followed every severe drought and took a heavy toll of life in both urban and rural areas. Under such conditions the pace of urbanisation was to remain slow.

By the middle of nineteenth century, things started looking up. It was a time by which the British empire had consolidated itself and established an elaborate spatial structure of administration with an imperial capital, provincial capitals, and district/tahsil headquarters as the control points. All such places either already had or gradually developed an urban character (Map 5).

Industrialisation in the modern sense also started in India around this very time. Bombay grew into a centre of cotton textiles and Calcutta of jute textiles. The first railways were also laid in the early years of the second half of the nineteenth century, and most of the important places got connected by rail before the close of the century. Railways gave a new impetus to the growth of industrial, trade and transport towns. Nonetheless, a new economic activity showed a tendency of concentration in the three port cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in conformity with the colonial nature of urbanisation (Map 6). The prominent administrative centres also experienced some growth consequent upon building of cantonments, civil lines and railway colonies in them. The British deserve a credit for founding a number of hill stations as well. Nora identified 94 such places\(^39\). All the above mentioned developments practically bypassed the erstwhile princely states as a result of which degree of urbanisation remained low in most of them\(^40\).

Conclusions

Notwithstanding a long history of urbanisation going back to four to five millinea, and despite some vital developments stimulating urbanisation since the middle of

\(^{39}\) N. Mitchell : The Indian Hill Station, Kodaikanal, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1973, figure 25.

\(^{40}\) Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. 1, 1909, op. cit., p. 461.
nineteenth century, India was at a low level of urbanisation in the beginning of the twentieth century. Hardly one-tenth of the total population was living in urban places. This was because of the continued subsistence nature of agricultural economy over most parts of India. The new developments in the field of industry and transport were highly localised and their impact on the life and economy of the country was yet to be felt\textsuperscript{41}.

\textsuperscript{41} K. Davis : \textit{op. cit.}, p. 23.