
THE RISE OF URBAN CENTRES IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.2432>**ABSTRACT**

Urbanisation in ancient India unfolded in two distinct waves, separated by a thousand-year rural hiatus. The first, the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2500–1800 BCE), produced remarkably planned cities like Mohenjodaro and Harappa, but declined around 1800 BCE. The second urbanisation, beginning c. 600 BCE in the Ganga Valley, was driven by iron-plough agriculture, agricultural surplus, long-distance trade, the emergence of powerful states such as Magadha, and the urbanising influence of Buddhism and Jainism. This paper traces the causes, morphology, and legacy of these urban centres, focusing on Pataliputra, Taxila, Kausambi, Varanasi, Ujjain, and Tamil port cities like Kaveripattinam and Arikamedu. It examines the role of guilds, coinage, urban administration, and religious institutions in sustaining urban life. The paper argues that ancient Indian urbanism was an indigenous, multi-centred phenomenon that shaped the subcontinent's political and economic geography for centuries. The decline in the early medieval period was partial, not absolute – many cities continued as vital nodes under successive empires, leaving an enduring imprint on India's settlement geography.

KEYWORDS: Urbanisation, Indus Valley Civilisation, second urbanisation, Ganga Valley, iron technology, mahajanapadas, trade routes, Mauryan cities, Pataliputra, Taxila, urban planning, Arthashastra, guilds, coinage, Buddhism, early historic India.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian cities is nearly as old as civilisation itself, yet it is not a continuous story. The great towns of the Indus Valley vanished around 1800 BCE, and for almost a millennium the subcontinent remained predominantly rural. Only around the sixth century BCE did a new urban revolution take hold, this time in the fertile plains of the Ganga. This

second wave gave rise to cities that became political capitals, commercial emporia, and cultural crucibles – many of which survive to this day. The urban centres of ancient India were not merely collections of dwellings but carefully planned settlements that served as administrative, commercial, and religious hubs, reflecting sophisticated social organisation and economic complexity. Understanding this process requires a detailed examination of both phases of urbanisation, the factors that enabled urban growth, the character of major cities, and the networks that sustained them.

The First Urbanisation: Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2500–1800 BCE)

The Harappan cities, belonging to the Indus Valley Civilisation, were marvels of urban planning. Mohenjodaro and Harappa featured grid-iron streets oriented to the cardinal directions, covered drains with manholes for cleaning, and standardised baked-brick houses of uniform size. The Great Bath at Mohenjodaro and the Great Granary at Harappa indicate public architecture of considerable sophistication. Dholavira in Gujarat had a sophisticated water-management system with reservoirs, dams, and step-wells, reflecting an acute understanding of hydrology in an arid environment. Lothal possessed a tidal dockyard, suggesting active maritime trade with Mesopotamia. These cities were administrative and religious centres, with evidence of craft specialisation including bead-making, shell-working, and metallurgy. The discovery of standardised chert weights in a binary system and thousands of seals with an undeciphered script indicates a regulated trade network extending to Mesopotamia, as evidenced by Harappan seals found in Ur and other Sumerian sites. The uniformity of brick sizes, town plans, and weight systems across hundreds of sites, from Rakhigarhi in the north to Daimabad in the south, suggests a centralised authority or at least a strong cultural and economic cohesion that transcended regional boundaries.

The decline around 1800 BCE is still debated among scholars. Climate change, evidenced by the drying up of the Ghaggar-Hakra river system, which is often identified with the Vedic Saraswati, appears to have been a major factor. Tectonic shifts may have altered river courses, and ecological over-exploitation, including deforestation for brick-making and overgrazing, likely compounded the crisis. Some scholars also point to Aryan migrations as a disruptive factor, though the archaeological record does not show a sudden violent invasion. After this collapse, the region reverted to village and pastoral life, as reflected in the Rig Vedic hymns, which describe a society centred on cattle-rearing, agriculture, and tribal chieftainships without any reference to cities, writing, or large-scale public works. The Harappan urban

tradition was completely forgotten, and urban life had to be reinvented from scratch in a different geographical and cultural context.

The Long Urban Hiatus (c. 1800–600 BCE)

For nearly a thousand years, from approximately 1800 to 600 BCE, no major urban centre emerged anywhere in the subcontinent. This period, often termed the Vedic age, saw the gradual expansion of agriculture from the north-west into the Ganga plains, along with the formation of tribal polities known as janapadas. However, settlements remained small, non-urban, and largely self-sufficient. The later Vedic texts, including the Brahmanas and Upanishads, describe a rural society with chiefs, known as rajan, ruling from fortified but modest settlements called puras, which were more akin to stockades than cities. There is no evidence of craft specialisation beyond the household level, no writing system, and no large-scale trade networks. Urban life, once lost, had to be reinvented entirely – not revived from any memory of the Indus cities, which had been completely forgotten by the peoples of the Ganga valley. This reinvention occurred around 600 BCE through a convergence of transformative factors that fundamentally altered the social and economic landscape of northern India.

Causes of the Second Urbanisation (c. 600 BCE)

The spread of iron technology was perhaps the single most important catalyst for the second urbanisation. Iron tools – ploughshares, axes, and sickles – enabled the clearance of the dense forests that covered the middle Ganga plain and facilitated deeper and more efficient tillage of the heavy alluvial soils. This dramatically increased agricultural yields, creating a substantial surplus that could sustain non-food-producing populations such as artisans, traders, administrators, priests, and soldiers. Iron also provided superior weapons, including swords, arrowheads, and spearheads, which aided state formation through conquest and the subjugation of rival tribes. With iron ploughs, the cultivation of rice, which produces higher yields per acre than wheat and barley, expanded rapidly, supporting denser populations than the north-west could sustain. The agricultural surplus was systematically extracted by emerging states in the form of revenue, known as bali and bhaga, which financed standing armies, bureaucracies, and monumental urban construction. This symbiotic relationship between agricultural productivity, state extraction, and urban growth created a virtuous cycle of expansion.

Concurrently, the political landscape was transformed by the formation of the mahajanapadas, or sixteen great states, which emerged in the Ganga valley and parts of the Deccan. These included Magadha, Kosala, Vatsa, Kashi, and others, each with a fortified capital that served as both a military stronghold and an administrative headquarters. The capitals of these states – Rajagriha in Magadha, Shravasti in Kosala, Kausambi in Vatsa, and Varanasi in Kashi – were the earliest urban centres of the second urbanisation. The intense competition among these states for territory, resources, and trade routes accelerated urban development, as each state sought to strengthen its economic and military base. The rise of Magadha as the dominant power, culminating in the Mauryan Empire, was both a cause and a consequence of urban prosperity.

Additionally, long-distance trade networks expanded dramatically during this period. The Uttarapatha, or northern highway, connected the Ganga valley with the north-west and Central Asia, while the Dakshinapatha, the southern route, linked it to the Deccan and the western coast. These routes facilitated the movement of goods, people, and ideas. Coinage, in the form of punch-marked silver and copper coins, was introduced around the sixth century BCE, revolutionising exchange by replacing barter and enabling the accumulation of capital. Merchants, known as sreshthins, and their guilds, called shrenis, became powerful urban actors with their own laws, arbitration systems, and even military forces. These guilds not only controlled trade and craft production but also acted as bankers, lending money to kings and financing public works.

The rise of Buddhism and Jainism, with their monastic orders known as sanghas, also promoted urbanisation. Monasteries, or viharas, were built in or near cities, attracting donations from merchants and kings, who sought religious merit. These institutions became centres of learning, manuscript production, and economic activity, further anchoring urban life. Buddhist and Jain texts, such as the Pali Canon and the Jaina Agamas, provide detailed descriptions of contemporary cities, their markets, and their social life, testifying to the central role of urban centres in the new religious movements. The association of these heterodox religions with urban patronage created a powerful link between commerce, piety, and urban growth.

Major Urban Centres of the Second Urbanisation

By the Mauryan period, from approximately 322 to 185 BCE, India had dozens of cities, many of which were described in vivid detail by foreign travellers and indigenous texts. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court, left a comprehensive account of Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital near modern Patna. According to his *Indica*, Pataliputra was a long, narrow city, stretching nine miles along the southern bank of the Ganges and one and a half miles in width, protected by a massive wooden palisade with 570 towers and sixty-four gates, and surrounded by a broad and deep moat that served both defensive and drainage functions. Excavations at Kumrahar have confirmed the existence of a pillared hall with eighty monolithic sandstone pillars, possibly used for royal audiences, as well as wooden structures and storage pits. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the seminal text on statecraft, prescribes a square gridiron plan for new cities, with six main roads dividing the city into wards, and specific provisions for temples, markets, and residential quarters, reflecting the sophisticated administrative thinking of the period. The city also had a sophisticated system of aqueducts and wells to supply water to its dense population.

Taxila in the north-west, now in Pakistan, was a cosmopolitan centre of learning and commerce, where Indian, Persian, and Greek influences converged. Its university attracted students from across the known world, and its position on the Silk Road made it a vital node for the trade in silk, spices, and precious stones. Taxila's strategic location at the crossroads of Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent made it a melting pot of cultures, and its archaeological remains include Buddhist stupas, Hindu temples, and Greek-style architecture. Kausambi, near modern Allahabad, was a thriving commercial city, with numerous warehouses, workshops for textiles, metalwork, and ivory carving, and a bustling river port on the Yamuna. Its prosperity was built on the trade routes that converged there, and it was also an important centre of Buddhist learning. Varanasi was already famous for its fine muslin, perfumes, and sandalwood, and its religious significance as a pilgrimage centre made it a hub of religious tourism. Ujjain in central India, strategically located on the Tropic of Cancer, sat astride the trade routes linking north and south, and later became an astronomical centre under the Gupta period, with the famous astronomer Varahamihira working there.

In the south, the Sangam period, from roughly 300 BCE to 300 CE, saw the rise of port cities like Kaveripattinam, known as Puhar, the capital of the Cholas; Arikamedu, a bustling Indo-Roman trading station near Pondicherry; and Muziris on the Kerala coast, which was

described in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea as a flourishing port. Recent excavations at Keeladi in Tamil Nadu have yielded brick structures, terracotta figurines, beads, and Roman rouletted ware, confirming that this was an organised urban settlement with a literate society and extensive trade connections. The Tamil epics Silappatikaram and Manimekalai provide literary descriptions of bustling city life with multi-storeyed buildings, crowded markets, temples, and royal courts, reflecting a sophisticated urban culture. These cities were not merely ports but also centres of craft production, particularly textiles and beads, which were exported across the Indian Ocean.

Urban Morphology, Administration, and Society

Ancient Indian cities were multifunctional in character. They served as royal capitals, revenue collection points, central marketplaces, craft production centres, and defensive strongholds. The Arthashastra distinguishes several categories of urban settlements – rajadhani (capital), pattana (port), nigama (market town), and dronamukha (river-port) – reflecting a hierarchical urban network that integrated small towns with large cities. Inscriptions and literary sources indicate that city administration often involved a municipal council, known as the nagarashreshthin, which comprised the chief merchant, the chief artisan, and the chief scribe. This council managed civic amenities, regulated markets, collected local taxes, and adjudicated commercial disputes, indicating a degree of corporate self-governance, albeit under the overarching authority of the king. The presence of civic amenities – public wells, bathing ghats, gardens, hospitals, and rest houses for travellers – is mentioned in both Buddhist Jataka tales and epigraphic records, suggesting a concern for public welfare and urban hygiene.

The social composition of cities was equally diverse, with distinct quarters for different occupational groups – weavers, metalworkers, potters, and merchants – as well as separate residential areas for the aristocracy and religious orders. This spatial organisation reflects a high degree of social and economic specialisation. The urban population included not only the wealthy merchants and nobles but also a large number of artisans, labourers, servants, and slaves. The guilds, or shrenis, played a central role in urban social organisation, providing a sense of community and mutual support among members of the same profession. They also served as patrons of religious institutions, endowing temples and monasteries with donations, as recorded in numerous inscriptions.

Trade Networks, Monetisation, and Urban Prosperity

Urban prosperity was fuelled by vibrant internal and external trade networks. The Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods saw the widespread circulation of silver punch-marked coins, and later the gold coins of the Kushans and Guptas, which facilitated large-scale commercial transactions. Ports like Bharuch, known as Bhrigukachchha, on the Gujarat coast, and Tamruk, known as Tamralipti, in Bengal, handled the export of spices, fine textiles, ivory, and precious stones in exchange for Roman gold coins, amphorae of wine, glassware, and coral. The discovery of large hoards of Roman coins, particularly denarii and aurei, in south Indian hoards, especially in the Coimbatore and Trichinopoly regions, testifies to the intensity of this two-way maritime trade. The trade with Rome was so extensive that it was mentioned by Pliny the Elder, who complained about the drain of Roman gold to India.

Guilds, or shrenis, of merchants and artisans were so powerful that they issued their own coins, employed their own armies, and even made donations to religious institutions on a massive scale, as evidenced by numerous donative inscriptions at Buddhist stupas like Sanchi and Bharhut. The existence of mints in almost every important urban centre indicates wide-spread monetisation, which in turn facilitated the regular payment of salaries to soldiers and officials, the collection of taxes, and the settlement of trade debts across long distances. This monetised economy underpinned the fiscal stability of empires and the prosperity of urban elites. The introduction of coinage also allowed for the development of credit instruments and banking, which further stimulated commercial activity.

Decline and Transformation (c. 300–600 CE)

Between 300 and 600 CE, archaeological evidence indicates a contraction of urbanism in many parts of the subcontinent, particularly in the Deccan after the decline of the Satavahanas. Historians have proposed several explanations for this decline. Some attribute it to the rise of feudal structures, where political power and economic surplus were increasingly controlled by rural landed intermediaries, known as samantas, rather than urban magnates. This shift in power from cities to the countryside reduced the importance of urban centres as administrative and economic hubs. Others point to the decline of long-distance trade with the Roman Empire following the collapse of the western Roman Empire, which reduced the inflow of bullion and thus constricted the monetary economy. A third explanation focuses on environmental factors, including changes in river courses and climatic shifts that affected

agricultural productivity. The silting up of ports and changes in river systems also contributed to the decline of some coastal cities.

However, unlike the Harappan collapse, these cities did not disappear entirely. Pataliputra continued as a regional centre under the Guptas and later the Palas, and many towns survived as pilgrimage centres, known as tirthas, or as nodes of local and regional trade. The urban tradition established during this period became an enduring feature of Indian civilisation, persisting through the medieval period and into modernity. The second urbanisation left a permanent imprint on India's settlement geography, and many of its major cities continue to be inhabited to this day. The continuity of these urban centres, despite periods of decline, testifies to the resilience of India's urban tradition and its ability to adapt to changing political and economic circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The rise of urban centres in ancient India was not a one-off event but a dynamic process of invention, adaptation, and resilience. The second urbanisation was distinctly different from the first – it was not a revival of the Harappan tradition but a completely new creation, driven by the synergistic combination of iron technology, agricultural surplus, state formation, long-distance trade, and the urbanising influence of heterodox religions. The cities of the Ganga valley and the Tamil south became enduring symbols of Indian civilisation, proving that urban life, once established, became an integral part of the subcontinent's social fabric. Their legacy is visible not only in the archaeological record but also in the continued cultural and economic importance of cities like Varanasi, Patna, and Madurai. Understanding this process helps us appreciate the deep roots of India's urban heritage and the complex interplay of technology, polity, economy, and religion that shaped it. The urban centres of ancient India were not mere imitations of western Asian models but indigenous expressions of social and economic complexity that developed in response to local conditions and continued to evolve over centuries, demonstrating remarkable continuity amidst change. The study of ancient Indian urbanisation thus reveals a story of innovation, integration, and enduring legacy that continues to shape the subcontinent's urban landscape.

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