

Unit 8

Ancient, Medieval and Colonial Cities: Case Studies

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Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the emergence of the ancient city of Ujjain;
- describe some of the socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of agricultural settlements and resettlements around Ujjain;
- discuss the medieval city of Shahjahanabad in the 17th century;
- describe its architectural journey through history during the medieval times;
- explain the different parts of the colonial city of Kolkata and their social significance during the colonial period.

8.1 Introduction

Cities have challenged human imagination ever since they came into existence. From the smallest to the largest, the earliest to the latest, cities have been the greatest points of concentration of humans and their social relationships. We wish to enquire about the Indian experience of urbanism. We shall begin with a study of the origin of urban centres. This will be followed by brief descriptions of cities in ancient, medieval and modern India. Urban centres emerged in ancient India around 2500 BC. The impressive ruins of cities like Harappa and Mohenjodaro are a mute testimony to this remarkable development. However, we have not been able to decipher their script. So, our understanding of the structure of urbanism is limited. We do not know whether the rulers of Harappa were traders, priests or warriors. That is why we intend to take up the study of a city from the sixth century BC usually referred to as the period of second urbanization.

For the study of city in ancient India we shall focus on Ujjain, a city located in the state presently known as Madhya Pradesh. This will be followed by a case study of Shahjahanabad i.e., old Delhi. For the modern period we shall study the structure of the city of Kolkata, the modern capital of West Bengal. These case studies are presented to show the similarities as well as the dissimilarities in their structure.

8.2 Emergence of the City of Ujjain

Before we begin with the discussion on the emergence of the city of Ujjain, it will be appropriate to understand what is meant by “urbanism” in the Indian context. Let us examine how it is defined.

A Definition of Urbanism

The sixth century BC saw the emergence of Ujjain as an important urban centre. Urban centres emerge in the context of very significant changes in the society. The society of the preceding period was based on kinship. Social differentiation was minimal, meaning that categories like rich and poor did not exist. Urban centres emerge in societies which are divided between rulers and ruled and rich and poor. The rich and powerful maintain and display their wealth and power by building mansions and acquiring things considered precious by society. For example, they try to acquire precious stones from distant lands since the possession of these stones will add to their prestige. Precious things are usually acquired from distant lands. Thus, there is a need for people who will bring those stones and people who will cut and polish them. Urban communities possess groups like rulers, traders, priests and craft specialists. None of them produce their own food. People who do not produce their food too need to eat. Their food is produced by agriculturists in the surrounding areas. That is why it is important to learn about the agricultural communities in areas surrounding Ujjain.

The Prehistory of Urbanism in Ujjain

To be able to understand the emergence of Ujjain we need to go into its prehistoric past. Agricultural groups had colonized Madhya Pradesh from about 2500 BC. The next 1700 year saw the expansion of agricultural communities. However, there were periodic breaks. At some point the agricultural communities would disappear. After a gap of a few years new groups of agriculturists would again found new villages. All these agricultural groups were using primitive tools made of stone and copper. From a long term perspective there seems to have been an increase in the number of agricultural settlements as a whole between 2500 BC and 800 BC. Some of these settlements were large enough to have more than a thousand people living in them. The growing density of settlements meant that the isolation of the agricultural communities of Maharashtra, Malwa or eastern Madhya Pradesh gave way to a continuous string of settlements. Along these ribbons of more or less continuous settlements emerged trade routes.

Desertion of Agricultural Settlements and Re-settlement around Ujjain

Around 800 BC many settlements were abandoned. Not much is known regarding the causes of this desertion. Many scholars believe that it was caused by climatic changes. What is more likely is that this period witnessed the coming of warlike communities from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. These communities had strong notions of hierarchy. Conflict between the local communities and the immigrants seems to have produced a new society based on centralization of power and hierarchy. The area witnessed large scale re-settlement of the population.

An important new development was the emergence of a large number of agricultural settlements in and around the Ujjain area. The concentration of settlements in the Ujjain area shows that agriculturists were concentrating on better quality land rather than expanding to the marginal areas. The relative closeness and contiguity of the settlements would help powerful leaders keep a larger population under their control. It is likely

that the powerful leaders would force people to settle down in the surrounding areas. This would help state systems to consolidate their power. It culminated in the emergence of a few large settlements like Ujjain, which could dwarf the largest settlements of the preceding phase.

Some of the settlements were surrounded by fortifications. Building fortification must have required mobilisation of a large manpower. Such mobilisation was possible only in the context of the siphoning off of a large surplus by a powerful class. Our tenuous evidence suggests that a class divided society had emerged. Such societies need to define their frontiers much more clearly than kinship-based societies. They can wage wars to take captives for labour and military service. They would not allow uncontrolled movement of outsiders into their territory, for its prosperous upper classes might be attractive targets of attack. Perhaps, fortifications were the first tentative steps of state societies in defining boundaries.

Two processes are visible in Ujjain and the surrounding areas. One is the concentration of a large number of villages around Ujjain which is in sharp contrast to other areas of Madhya Pradesh. In the earlier period agricultural communities were evenly spread across various parts of Madhya Pradesh. On the other hand if we study the settlement pattern of sites around the sixth century BC, villages seem to converge on the modern district of Ujjain. This change in settlement pattern has less to do with factors like presence of water bodies and good agricultural land and more to do with the institution of power. Probably, the powerful rulers forced people to settle near Ujjain to be able to collect taxes. So, urban centres seem to have emerged in a situation of conflict and resettlement of population. The other important process that is visible is the building of fortification. A fortification, a mile long and three quarters of a mile wide was erected soon after the founding of Ujjain. It has been suggested that building such a fortification required a workforce of 34,666 individuals working for 150 days. The size of the settlement of Ujjain suggests that it would have a population of about 38000. In that case the construction of fortification in Ujjain would have required the mobilization of almost 91% of the population. The mobilization of such a large part of the population points to the emergence of a powerful ruling class, since such an enterprise would not be undertaken by common people who would have little or nothing to defend. It was within the context of a strong political power that other features like use of coinage and writing emerged.

Reflection and Action 8.1

Visit your local library and borrow a book on the stories of Vikramaditya and Raja Bhoj or any other story which describes an ancient city/town in India, like Vaishali, Taxila, etc.

Read this book and write an essay of about one page on the city/town which forms the background of this story. Discuss the architecture, landscape, social and cultural significance of different parts described in the story in your essay.

Compare your essay with that of other students at your Study Centre.

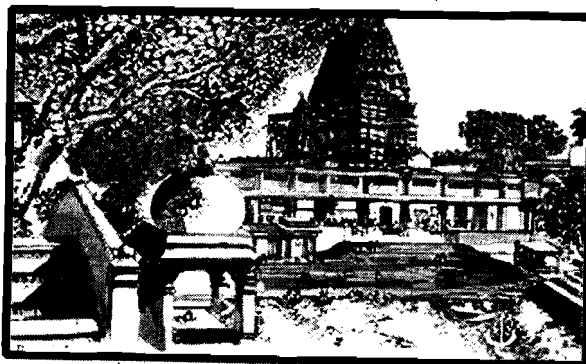
A Literary description of Ujjain

In the sixth century BC Ujjain emerged as the centre of a very powerful kingdom. It was called the Avanti Mahajanapada. We find many descriptions of Ujjain as an important urban centre. It remained an important urban

BC mention it as an exporter of semi-precious stones to Greece and Rome. Literary references to Ujjain are plentiful. Here is a description of Ujjain taken from a book named Kadambari which was written in the seventh century by writer named Banabhatta.

We quote from Kadambari—

There is in the country of Avanti a city called Ujjaiyini which excels in splendour the world of gods... It is (so holy that it is) as if it were the birth place of the Krita age. It is as if it were a second Earth created suitable for residence by the divine Siva... It is surrounded by an encircling ditch full of water... It is surrounded by a circular rampart...It is decked with long, big market roads...have in them exposed (for sale) heaps of conches, oyster-shells, pearls, corals, and emerald gems... It is decked with picture galleries. Its squares are decked with sacred shrines...It is decked with suburbs, in which there are reservoirs of water...in which there is (always) darkness on account of (the presence of) green gardens...In it is publicly announced the worship of the God of Love...In that city the sins (of the people) are all wiped off by the noise of the (sacred) studies which are always carried on there. There the intoxicated peacocks, ardently engaged in dancing and having their plumages unfurled to a circle, set up a loud tumult with their cries, in houses furnished with water fountains in which there is the deep rumbling of clouds in the form of the dull sound of the drums (beaten therein during music practice). The city is inhabited by pleasure loving people, ... Like the moon in the matted hair of Siva, they possess wealth in crores. Like the law codes called Smritis, they cause to be built public halls, caravan sarais, wells, public places for drinking water, gardens, temples, bridges, and mechanical contrivances (like water-wheels etc.). Like the mountain Mandara they wear upon their persons all the choice jewels ... They have a special knowledge of (i.e., are experts in the chief points) of all the arts...their dress is brilliant and they learn all the dialects (prevailing in all parts of the country)...and they know all the alphabets...the city...has large colonies of cowherds occupying (all its parts in) all directions...it is full of thousands of sacred temples...it exhibits (in its gambling saloons) the throws of golden dice...it gives delight to large crowds of gallants... it is charming on account of the various sports of children....In that city the divine Sun daily appears...his horses turn their mouths downwards, being attracted by the very melodious sounds of the singing of ladies practising music on the terraces of lofty mansions....In that city, the auspicious songs, sung at dawn by numerous caged parrots and starlings(mainas) awakened at the close of the night, are rendered vain...on account of the jingling sound of the ornament of the ladies...In that city ...there was examination of Varna (testing of colour), but only in the case of gold (and not of the castes of the people) (Translation, Kane:67-74).



Ancient City of Ujjain

Some Observations

This description begins with an architectural presentation of the city. Having described the parapet and defences of the city, the author Banabhatta takes us to the 'path through the market'. The window-shoppers' description of the wealth of the city shows the power of the merchant-class. This is followed by a description of sacred shrines and suburbs watered by beautiful ponds and gardens. This architectural presentation is followed by a description of the animate world of people engaged in festivities, gambling in saloons, worshipping Mahakala and Kamadeva, engaging in chanting sacred incantations, frolicking in the waters of the river Shipra, donating money for building public halls, places for drinking water, temples etc. Their speech is agreeable and they are familiar with diverse scripts and dialects. They dress brilliantly and are familiar with all the arts. The melodious songs of the singers are specially mentioned. The city is a hub of secular activity, of movement.

Cities in ancient India emerged in the context of population shifts and warfare. Warriors and priests were the dominant figures in this period. Walls of the city provided the safety and security for it to develop as centres of trade and exchange. The extract from Kadambari presents the different foci of the city. The overall image is one of tremendous diversity. Our description shows elements related to trade and religion. However, it is political power that seems to organise the shape of urbanism.

8.3 Shahjahanabad : A City in the 17th Century

New Delhi, the modern capital of India has a long history. It is believed to have been the capital of the mythical Pandavas. The presence of Ashoka's inscriptions in Delhi indicate that it was an important centre in the third century BC. It was the capital of many Turk kings from the thirteenth century. The long history of Delhi as an urban centre does have something to do with its location in the watershed between the Gangetic and Indus river systems. However, its predominance and decline seems to coincide with the fate of dynasties that ruled from here. Here, we shall discuss the structure of the city of Shahjahanabad, the last pre-modern city of Delhi.

Shahjahanabad: An Architectural Journey

As the name suggests, Shahjahanabad (modern old Delhi) was founded by the famous Mughal king Shahjahan. Hitherto, the Mughals had ruled from Agra. Shahjahan shifted the capital from Agra to Delhi in 1639. The new city was named after the emperor. He built a city surrounded by a fortification. He also built his palace (Red Fort) and the famous Jama Masjid. Members of the royal family and his nobles built various palaces, gardens and mosques in the fortified enclosure.

The fate of Shahjahanabad was inextricably bound with the state system created by the Mughals. The imperial household located in the majestic Red Fort was the central institution of the city. The palace fortress was a huge enclave. The wall surrounding this fortress was made of red sandstone 60 to 75 feet in height. It covered an octagon nearly two miles around. It enclosed an area of about 125 acres. This palace fortress was studded with beautiful mansions, fountains and gardens. Surrounded by a moat it had four large gateways.

Red Fort was not simply the king's private mansion where he lived with his family. It was virtually the microcosm of the empire. The emperor's 'Hall of general audience' and 'Hall of special audience' were the centres where

all decisions concerning the empire were taken. It was here that decisions about war and peace were made, ranks of officials were decided and generals and officials were dispatched to different parts of the empire. The palace fortress also contained a large bazaar, a number of offices for clerks who kept accounts of the taxation and expenses of the empire. Then there were stables for horses, elephants, camels and cows. Other rooms held workshops where weapons, carpets, fine cloth, gold work and jewellery were manufactured. There were store rooms for food and clothing and buildings for treasure. Then of course there were houses for soldiers, clerks, merchants, physicians, poets, religious specialists and astrologers of the imperial household. According to one estimate the Red Fort contained about 57,000 persons. This is larger than the population of many towns and cities in pre-modern and modern times. For example, the population of the city of Harappa is believed to have been anywhere between 25,000 to 35,000.

The Red Fort was part of a larger city called Shahjahanabad. A massive wall made of stone 3.8 miles in length encircled Shahjahanabad. It was 27 feet high. It enclosed an area of about 1500 acres. This city had mansions of the Mughal nobles. Each of these mansions was a mini Red Fort in terms of its structure. The household of the princes and nobles would be organised along the same principle. So, the mansion would contain not only members of the family of the noble, it would have its own set of soldiers, clerks, servants, crafts persons and small traders. According to an estimate princes in Shahjahanabad maintained a household of about 12,500 people while the nobles had a household of 3100 persons on an average. These people often lived inside the mansions or around them in mud thatched houses.

Reflection and Action 8.2

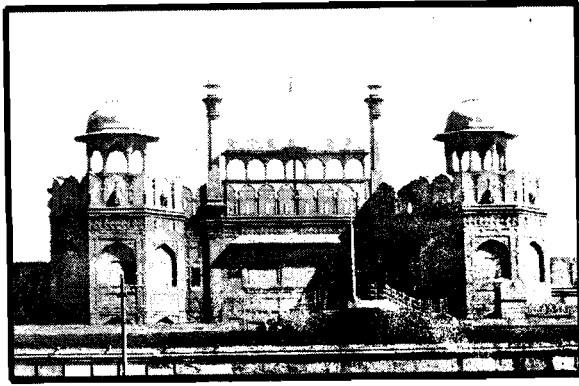
If possible, visit the Red Fort in Delhi. Find out the architectural design and history of the Red Fort from the notice boards, or the Sound and Light programmes held there. If not, find out about different parts of the Red Fort and its significance from the website.

Write a report on "History and Architecture of Red Fort, Delhi."
Discuss your report with other students at your Study Centres.

Markets in the City

There were two important bazaars in the city. Chandani Chowk stretched from the Lahori gate of the Red Fort to the famous Fatehpuri mosque. A canal flowed through its centre, watering a row of trees that provided shade and a place to rest. The other bazaar known as the Faiz bazaar stretched from the Akbarabadi gate of the Red Fort to the city gate of the same name. In these markets one could get anything ranging from delicious kababs to expensive diamonds. Each prince or noble maintained a separate market staffed by client merchants.

Merchants and bankers staying in the Chandani Chowk areas were not dependent on emperors and nobles for their survival. This will be clear from the fact that the Mughal empire represented an incredible centralisation of the economic resources of the empire. According to an estimate, in the year 1650 four princes and sixty nine great nobles received about 38 percent of the revenues of the empire. As a result more than 40 percent of the revenues of the empire were concentrated in Shahjahanabad alone. It is the nobles and their retainers who effectively created a demand for items to be purchased in the market.



Red Fort of Delhi (Shahjahanabad)

Suburbs of Shahjahanabad

There were many suburbs of Shahjahanabad. There were a large number of tombs, gardens and bazaars where lot of economic and social activity was carried out. Many of the older settlements of Delhi continued to co-exist with Shahjahanabad. Before the city of Shahjahanabad was founded it was an important pilgrim centre for Muslims. It had tombs of saints like Nizamuddin Aulia, Nasiruddin Chirag Dilli and Bakhtiyar Kaki. To these centres came innumerable pilgrims.

Some Suggestions

The description of Shahjahanabad shows that all aspects of the urban life bore the stamp of the imperial household. The emperor treated the empire as an extension of his household. This was an empire that sociologists call 'Patrimonial bureaucratic' state systems. The crucial role of political power in the creation of cities is also proved by the fact that Shahjahan's shift of capital from Agra to Delhi in 1648 caused an immediate decline in the fortunes of the city of Agra. Surrounding communities pillaged Agra despite the protection of the Mughal force. The decline was so marked that the English and the Dutch closed their factories in Agra.

We are suggesting that the medieval cities had a large network of trading communities. The centres of pilgrimage too flourished in their own right. The case of Shahjahanabad has been presented to show the overarching presence of political power in the life of a city. It was power structures which seem to have determined the ebb and flow in the fortune of cities. We shall follow our review with a description of the city of Kolkata in the time of British rule.

8.4 Kolkata: a Colonial City

In this section we wish to describe the structure of a colonial city. An interesting fact about Kolkata is that it was founded in the same century as Shahjahanabad. However, its ambience and image are radically different from Shahjahanabad. This difference is related to the structures of power that created these cities.

Kolkata is the capital of West Bengal. It is located on the bank of the River Hooghly. The city's history begins with the arrival of the British East India Company in this area. In 1699, the British completed the construction of Fort William, which was used to station its troops. It was named the capital of British India in 1772. It functioned as the capital of the British India for about 140 years until the shift of capital to New Delhi in 1911.

Kolkata's long history as the hub of British domination and as the focus of resistance to it have created a rich web of images about it. While one set

of scholars talk about the architectural grandeur of Kolkata, others describe the filth and squalor of its slums. One set would conjure images of leaders trying to ban Sati, introduce women's education and forge an Indian identity, others would talk about them as upper caste anglophiles least concerned with the fate of the poor. Most of these images were a product of the happenings in 19th century Kolkata.

We wish to focus on the 19th century Kolkata as a classic colonial city. A colony is a territory under the immediate political control of a geographically distant state.

The top-level administration of a colony is under the direct control of that distant state. It is from this point that we begin our description of Kolkata. It was a city which showcased the strengths of the state that controlled it. According to one estimate for 1914 three fifths of the British capital invested in India was based in Kolkata. Apparently, 81 percent of investments in Kolkata were of European origin while Indian investments amounted to only 3 percent.

Plan of the City

The White Town

Kolkata was founded by the British. The British had come here to promote their business interests and acquired an empire in the bargain. Kolkata was a typical colonial city. It could be seen in the landscape of this city. It was divided into three sectors. The dominant sector was the British part of the city called the 'White town'. Planned, spacious and grand, it would be the envy of the rich and powerful anywhere in the world. Here were located the buildings that would decide the fate of the empire in the Indian sub-continent. In the 'White town' the headquarters of the imperial government were located on Dalhousie Square. Impressive government buildings were complemented by the markets and bungalows spread along Esplanade, Chowringhee and Park Street.

This was also the area where one could find the offices of corporations having global reach. One could find offices of organisations dealing in tea plantations, railways, coal mines, jute mills, finance and commerce. So, business and politics mingled in these parts of Kolkata. This area had a population of about ten thousand. For a city that had a population of about half a million this was a miniscule number. But this was the sector of Kolkata that ruled not only the city but the entire sub-continent. Books written on Kolkata in this period would talk endlessly about this Kolkata. For example, a book written by one Mr. Cotton says—

There is everything to remind her citizens ... that she is the capital of British Raj: Wellesley's stately Government House, the statues of past Governor-Generals...the massive blocks of Government houses, the long array of palaces upon Chowringhee, the rows of warehouses and jetties and docks... the large European colony...the signs upon every hand of opulence and prosperity...

In a ninety page section of this book devoted to historic houses and famous localities of Kolkata there are just fifteen pages devoted to the Indian part.

The Intermediate Zone

Around the margins of the 'White town' had emerged an intermediate zone. It was inhabited by poor whites, Eurasians, large number of Muslim

service groups (mainly cooks and servants), and small groups of Jews, Armenians and Chinese. There were more prosperous Muslim groups too. They had migrated from outside Bengal. Many of them were part of the entourage of defeated kings like Tipu Sultan and Wajid Ali Shah. A large number of migrant workers from Bihar, United Provinces and Orissa also stayed in this area. They did not speak Bangla. Most of them spoke different varieties of Hindustani.

At the north-western border of the intermediate zone was located the Barabazar (the Great market). It was a traditional market with rows of shops along narrow lanes. While the sophisticated Dalhousie Square would be completely deserted at night, Barabazar would be bustling with people in day time as well as night time. This was the hub of Kolkata's commerce which spread out to the subcontinent and beyond. Here could be found 'Persians, Arabs, Jews, Marwaris, Armenians, Madrasees, Sikhs, Turks, Parsees, Chinese, Burmese and Bengalees'. Although some Bengali merchants had done well as British agents earlier, it was the Marwaris who were emerging as the key figures of this market complex.

The Bengali Zone

Beyond this circle was the area predominantly peopled by Bengalees. They formed about 55% of the population. This upper caste dominated group lived to the north and north east of the intermediate zone. This zone lacked planning and its filth and squalor begged description. Here lived the Bengali Bhadrak and a large unskilled and semi-skilled labour population, who earned their living as hawkers and housecleaners. There were a few areas like Bhowanipur on the fringe of the 'White town' where Bengali lawyers, doctors and other professionals lived.

The Bengali society was dominated by the families of merchant princes. They had made their fortune by acting as business agents of the European traders. Their palaces seemed more in the tradition of Shahjahanabad mansions where such buildings were surrounded by the mud houses of servants. The Bengali Bhadrak group which has dominated the images of Kolkata came into its own towards the second half of the 19th century. They defined themselves as the middle class situated below the aristocracy of merchant princes and above the menial workers. They went for Western education in a big way because this was the key to getting professional jobs of lawyers, doctors, teachers or clerks. It was this group that provided leadership to Bengali society. Beginning their career as assistants of the British they gradually emerged as a coherent group. Many of the members of the Bhadrak group provided leadership to movements against colonial rule.

8.5 Conclusion

We presented case studies of urban centres from ancient, medieval and colonial India. The presentation is sketchy – When we deal with an ancient city, the information available to us is limited. Nevertheless, the power and domination of the political elite is visible in the surviving fortification. The Medieval Shahjahanabad was willed in to existence by a king. That does not mean that the ancient or medieval cities did not have powerful merchant groups or religious elite. In fact the political elite was heavily dependent on funds provided by the merchant groups. Similarly, complex rituals were built into forms of political domination. This is usually called legitimisation. However, the example of Shahjahanabad showed that the class of merchants and bankers was completely dependent on political authority. Its fortunes fluctuated with those of its political masters.

The colonial city of Kolkata was a marginally different case. This was because it had some elements of modernity in it. Kolkata too was created by political force. Fort William with its military architecture is testimony to the political might of those who created this city. This political power brought in its wake modern forms of control. This was a form of control exercised by a country tens of thousands of kilometers away. The earlier forms of control centred on episodic use of violence. The new forms meant creation of a network through which the ruled were made aware of the continuous vigil by the state. That is why a very small number of Englishmen could control the entire subcontinent. Because of the distance from Britain very few British were available for administration, they needed subordinate classes of Indians to run their administration and business. These subordinate groups spawned the class of the Bhadrakol. This class itself was a very small section of the Bengali population. The Bengali population in turn was only about 55% of the population of Kolkata. But the dominant image of Kolkata is not that of the British architecture. Neither is it that of the successful Marwari business class. It is the image of the Bhadrakol class which was economically and politically marginal to the life of the city. This was possible only in the context of a colonial city where forms of control were radically different from those of the earlier times.

8.6 Further Reading

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