

CC-5: HISTORY OF INDIA (CE 750-1206)

IV. TRADE AND COMMERCE

(D). PROCESS OF URBANIZATION

The early medieval age in the historiography of Indian feudalism is said to have ushered in widespread decay of urban centres. The idea of decline of cities, urban crafts, trade and money in the early medieval times is an important part of the hypothesis of Indian feudalism. Historian R. S. Sharma has put forward his theory of a two-stage urban decay, one beginning in the Second half of the 3rd or the 4th century, and the second one starting after the 6th century. R. S. Sharma has summarized archaeological data from various regions to substantiate his theory. He admits that the Indian literary evidence for urban decay is not strong, but cites the accounts of Xuan Zang and Arab writers. His explanation of urban decay centres around a supposed decline in long-distance trade. Urban decline undermined the position of urban-based artisans and traders; artisans were forced to migrate to rural areas; traders were not able to pay taxes; the distinction between town and village became blurred.

The decay of urban centres is suggested to have resulted in ruralisation. Thus the expansion of the rural economy appears as the cause and effect of de-urbanization. The key to this critical situation is located in the practice of granting lands favouring agrarian spread and growth. This brought an end to the second urbanization in Indian history. Marxist historiography, however, attaches greatest importance to the improved use of iron technology and agricultural development generating the vital agrarian surplus as the key factor for the rise of cities belonging to second urbanization in India (600 BCE- CE 300). But the same genre of historical writings portray agrarian expansion of the early medieval period as the principal agent behind the disappearance of cities

on a pan-Indian scale from CE 300-CE 1000. The decay of urban centres in the 600 CE-1000 CE phase is explained as an impact of the languishing long-distance trade.

Urban contraction was, however, accompanied by agrarian expansion.

Elsewhere, R.S. Sharma cites epigraphic references to the transfer of rights over markets to donees, merchants transferring part of their profits to temples, and the transfer of customs dues from the state to temples. On this basis, he talks of a feudalization of trade and commerce. He argues that a mild urban renewal began in some parts of the subcontinent in the 11th century, and that urban processes were well-established by the 14th century. A revival of foreign trade-linked to an increase in the cultivation of cash crops, better irrigation techniques, increasing demand for commodities, improvements in ship-building and an expansion of internal trade-is cited as a major reason for the urban revival, as well as for the decline of the feudal order.

The urban processes in the early medieval India had been a subject of debate among the Historians. B.D. Chattopadhyaya has argued that the early medieval period saw the decline of certain urban centres, but there were others that continued to flourish, as well as some new ones that emerged. Xuan Zang suggests that cities such as Kaushambi, Shravasti, Vaishali, and Kapilavastu were in decline. But he also mentions flourishing ones such as Thaneshwar, Varanasi, and Kanyakubja. The archaeological data on the settlements of the period is patchy and inadequate. But some early historical cities continued to be inhabited during early medieval times, for e.g., Ahichchhatra, Atranjikhera, Rajghat, and Chirand.

With regard to monetary history, John S. Deyell has convincingly shown that money was not scarce in early medieval India, nor were the states of the time suffering from a financial crisis. There was a reduction of coin types and a

decline in the aesthetic quality of coins, but not in the volume of coins in circulation. Traders of the subcontinent were part of a wider world of trade interaction that connected Africa, Europe and various parts of Asia. India's trade with Southeast Asia and China grew during the early medieval period. Ranabir Chakravarti highlights the importance of mandapikas in the trade circuit of early medieval India. These were, for most part, local centres of exchange that constituted an intermediate level between the small, periodic markets and larger trade centres. They were also centres of collection of commercial tolls and duties. The analysis of literary and epigraphic sources of western India (1000-1300 CE) by V. K. Jain indicates that traders of this region were carrying business in luxury goods as well as in staples such as food grains, pulses, salt, oil, ghee, jaggery, etc. According to Jain the western Indian traders tended to confine their operation to coastal and internal trade, leaving the operation further afield to the Arabs and others. The diversification of trade commodities and trade links seemed to be the general pattern as far as Indian trade in the early medieval period is concerned.

In the far south the spurt of urban centres since the ninth century coincides with the growing appeal of Vaishnava and Saiva sectarian devotional cults, the construction of monumental temples around sacred centres associated with these devotional cult and the increasing political power of the Cholas. From the studies of Historian R. Champakalakshmi we get to know about the twin cities of the Cholas, Kudamukku-Paliyarai, situated in the most fertile tracts in the Kaveri delta, the core area of the Cholas. While Paliyarai was the site of the palace Kudamukku functioned as the sacred centre having a number of temples. The twin cities were located on an important trade route and noted for its transactions in two bulk items, areca nuts and betel nuts. There was also a concentration of metal workers in the area. According to R. Champakalakshmi, the rise of Kudamukku-Paliyarai, the twin cities of the Cholas to prominence

was a result of the factor, which are- (1) its access to and linkages with the hinterland for the supply of local agrarian.(2) the importation of luxury items for the consumption of the elite groups products. (3) its role as a religious centre leading to temple establishments.

It may therefore be reasonably argued that notwithstanding the decay of a number of prominent towns in India, especially in the Ganga valley, during CE 300-900, a general urban decay did not engulf the subcontinent as a whole. The diagnosis of urban anaemia leading to ruralization and peasantization may not serve as an all purpose key. Urban developments in early historical and early medieval times were not primarily conditioned by external trade. So the decline or otherwise of long-distance trade cannot be taken as the principal determinant of urban development and decay in Indian conditions. The greater the convergence of economic, political and cultural (including religious) activities at an urban centre, more eminent would be its position than cities with a predominantly single functional role. Urban centres of early medieval times however are seen not merely as a counterpoint to the feudal social formations, but also as possessing distinctiveness from cities belonging to the early historical phase. The second urbanization in Indian history (c. 600 BCE-CE 300) had its epicentre in the Ganga valley (or more precisely in the middle Ganga valley) which acted as a platform for the development of secondary urban centres. In the early medieval period Chattopadhyaya does not find any such epicentre generating urban impulses to disparate regions. Urban enters from CE600 onwards, on the other hand, appear to have been strongly oriented to their local roots and therefore may be judged in terms of their respective local developments and local formations. Such local formations were largely helped by agrarian expansion, generating resources for local or supra-local ruling groups. The mobilization of resources and the urge to procure exotic and luxury items by rulers would encourage movements of products, both within the region

and also beyond it. The growing popularity of sectarian bhakti cults was often expressed in the brisk temple- building activities and/or patronage to matha complexes. Both the temple and the matha are found to have provided excellent meeting grounds for ruling groups and mercantile communities. The combinations of these formations helped the emergence and development of early medieval urban centres which by their distinctiveness are situated by Chattopadhyaya in the third phase of urbanization in Indian history.

REFERENCE-

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