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Rise of Urban Centres: Theories of Urbanisation with Special Reference to Agra

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ABSTRACT

Emphasising on the importance of the study of rise of towns and the various processes that lead to its emergence, this paper attempt to throw light on the various theories of urbanisation. Further, through a case study of Agra, this paper locates the rise of Agra as an urban centre in India.

A town is not simply a physical object but an indication of the social, economic and in many cases political attribute. Though broad generalisations on the rise of towns and the nature of towns can be arrived at, it is imperative to analysis each town in its own right. This is crucial as not all towns can be straight-jacketed within a particular conceptual framework.

The emergence of a city, as we know it today, was not a sudden event. The early cities consisted of a space, square or circular in shape, surrounded by ramparts made of trunks of trees, or mud or blocks of stone, protected by a moat and entered by a gate. In short, it was an enclosure. Interestingly, the words that in modern English and modern Russian designate a city-town and gorod-was originally designated an enclosure.[1] People resorted to these enclosures only at the time of religious or civic ceremonies. But gradually from an occasional centre of assembly, the city became an administrative, religious, political and economic centre. Thus, the town is a social form in which the essential properties of the larger systems of social relations are grossly concentrated and intensified to a point where residential size, density and heterogeneity which are the formal characteristics of the town appear to be in themselves constituent properties of a distinct social order.[2]

It needs to be understood at the outset that the Western models of economic growth assign utmost importance to economic development as a concomitant phenomenon to the process of urbanisation. For instance, Brian Berry claimed that "economic advancement is related to urbanization and that increasing specialization and continued urban growth go hand in hand".[3]

The critical entry point to the debate about the causes for the rise of towns would be Henri Pirenne's contention. He argued that the thrust of Islam in the Mediterranean made impossible the commerce that sustained a certain activity in the cities and condemned them to an inevitable decline, paving the way for the emergence of feudalism. The Arab conquests of the seventh and eight centuries left Western Europe a closed, landlocked economy. But with the Crusades, Islamic frontiers were pushed back and trade revived. This led to the decline of feudalism and the rise of towns.

Maurice Dobb has assumed a general relationship between the decline of feudalism and the growth of towns with market exercising the disintegrating influence on feudalism. The rise of markets prepared the soil for the growth of forces which were to weaken and supplant feudalism. Thus, importance has been given to the relation between 'townness' and the dissolution of feudal social relations. Thus, town as a generic social object played a key role in the erosion and collapse of feudalism.

Dobb considered four theories of urban origins-feudal military administration, long distance trade, the concentration of agrarian production and continuity of Roman urban settlements. In later writings he added that the rise of towns was to an extent a process internal to the feudal system. However, Sweezy denies that there was anything urban about the decline of feudalism as towns were external in relation to feudalism.

But the decline of feudalism and rise of towns cannot be compartmentalised as feudal social relations itself generated processes of petty commodity production and exchange. The transition from feudalism to capitalism cannot be explained in terms of rise of towns and is a matter of the struggle of different groups within the feudal order to dominate small-scale production and to appropriate the profits of trade.[4]

Weber in his comparative analysis of ancient civilisations, showed many intricate and varied relations between religious traditions and social and economic structures of the ancient and medieval civilisations and the characteristics of their cities. He identifies three factors in the development of cities in Europe mainly Christianity, privileged position of the citizens

[1] Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, p. 58.
[2] Philip Abrams, 'Towns and Economic Growth: Some Theories and Problems', p. 10.
[3] Abanti Kundu, 'Urbanization in India: A contrast with Western Experience', p. 37.
[4] Philip Abrams, 'Towns and Economic Growth', p. 13.

and the decline of religious sanctions of kinship solidarity that facilitated the creation of a unified urban community.[5]

Weber makes a critical distinction between centres of production and centres of consumption. While the ancient Greek and Roman city tended to be centre of consumption, towns in medieval Europe were centre of production. Hence the medieval city was the launch-pad for the development of capitalism as they were centres of production.[6] He also maintains that labour was socially degraded in the polis in contrast to the position of the handicrafts in the later middle ages. Athenians held labour in contempt because of its association with slavery. The most significant expression of labour's oppressed social position in ancient Greece is the absence of guild associations and the various legal rights associated with them.

However, the absence of guilds in ancient Greece testifies to the strength of the common people than to their weakness and more to the relatively high status of labour than to its social degradation.[7] The laboring citizen in Athens did not require the kind of legal protection afforded by medieval guilds because he had the protection of the polis and his status as a citizen. The absence of guilds in ancient Athens reflected the success of the polis, and democracy in subjecting the patricians to the jurisdiction of the civic community as a whole.

Marx, while on the one hand, said that the whole economic history of society is characterised by antagonism between town and country, on the other he goes back to the analysis of whole systems of production, firmly ignoring the mirage of separation between town and country.

Scholars from Weber to Sjoberg and from Pirenne to Braudel realise that the only significant characteristic common to all towns is heterogeneity. Thus, Hoselitz distinguishes between generative and parasitic towns; Weber contrasts the patrician and plebian city; Sjoberg distinguishes between the industrial and pre-industrial city; Pirenne compares towns of the Liege type with towns of the Flemish type while Braudel, pointing to the specific variations in social relations within towns, emphasises three types of towns-open towns, closed towns and subject towns.

The towns in Middle Ages were 'guild towns' based on both handicraft and trading activities on a small scale where the "division of labour between the individual guilds was as yet very little developed and in the guilds themselves, it did not exist at all between the individual workers." The limited intercourse involved weak ties between the individual town and also between town and countryside.[8] With the emergence of a complex of technological and organisational changes, the cities no longer remained satisfied with their previous role and became production centres; the pre-industrial cities acquired their pre-eminence primarily as seats of administrative, social, cultural, political and religious as well as local cottage-craft-cum-trading organisations, but their role as exclusive large-scale production centres for the surrounding region was totally insignificant. Gradually the cities started serving their rural hinterlands with marketing and service facilities and supplying industrial goods and in turn received the influx of rural agricultural products to meet the demands for food and raw materials.

In the Indian scenario, scholars have put forward numerous explanations for urbanisation. K.M.Ashraf underlined the role of rulers in the process of urbanization. Successive dynasties of rulers laid foundations of new capital cities with royal palaces, markets, gardens, mosques, roads etc.[9] On the other hand, Mohammad Habib in his introduction to the second volume of Elliot and Dowson's *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* put forth the hypothesis of urban revolution in northern India during the 13th and 14th centuries. When the Turks entered the cities, the Hindu low-caste workers entered along with them. As their services were required for government and industrial purposes, they were not excluded from the city now and all people lived within the cities without any sort of discrimination. The cities under the new regime were developed into thriving centres of industry and commerce. The city labourer helped to establish the new regime and they preferred the sharia over the smriti. Thus the Ghorid conquest of India was really a revolution of Indian city labour led by the Ghorid Turks.

Irfan Habib also underlines that the Sultanate saw a considerable expansion of the urban economy. There was a considerable growth in the size and number of towns, a marked expansion in craft production, and a corresponding increase in commerce. Increase in craft production was signified by a number of changes or improvements in technology especially in the textiles, paper and building industries. However, these changes did not arise out of the liberation of any section of society. On the contrary, slave labour acquired crucial importance in the urban economy. It was a major channel for the gradual growth of an urban Muslim artisan class, standing outside the framework of the caste system and contributing an important element of competition and mobility in the organization of craft production

Moreland observed that some of the ancient capitals cities like Kanauj and Vijayanagar were in a state of decay while imperial capitals of Agra, the Deccan capitals of Golconda and Bijapur and provincial capitals like Delhi, Lahore, Multan, Allahabad, Patna, Ujjain, Ahmedabad, and Ajmer were large and populous cities.

The Mughal empire had an abundance of towns. Agra was said to be one of the biggest cities of the world. Its population swelled when the emperor's court was there and it dwindled in its absence. He assumed that most of the non-agrarian production went on in towns and cities and argues that industries were localised in a comparatively small number of towns and cities. Regular routes existed from Lahore to Kabul and from Multan to Qandahar carrying a considerable number

[5] Meera Bapat, 'Review: Towards Understanding Cities and Urban Systems', pp. 307-308.
[6] E. M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*, pp. 158-159.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 162.
[8] Abanti Kundu, 'Urbanization in India: A contrast with Western Experience', p. 38.
[9] Reeta Grewal, 'Urbanisation in Medieval India', in Indu Banga and G.S. Grewal eds., *Studies in Urban History*, 1978, pp 396-399.

of traffic. But this traffic was confined to goods of high value in proportion to their bulk. The most prominent communities of traders were the Muslims of the seaboard, the Baniyas of Gujarat and the Chettis of the Coromandel Coast. Inland and coastal trade of a cosmopolitan character was flourishing.

The king and his courtiers with their enormous incomes and huge establishments formed the major consumers of goods. The higher ranks, though few in number, controlled the expenditure of a large proportion of the income. Moreland regards them as parasites feeding upon the fruits of the workers toil and contributing nothing to the common stock. For the middle classes, patronage was the only alternative to the narrowness of the market for their skills or products. The state also patronized religious institutions, the majority of whom lived in towns and cities. Servants and slaves, who were attached to royal establishments and the establishments of the nobles composed a large number.

N. K. Naqvi in 'Urban centres and Industries in Upper India' takes up five cities for study-Lahore, Delhi, Agra, Benaras and Patna, the first three being capital cities and the last two being commercial towns. The capital cities were founded originally for political considerations and gradually developed identities, population, character and resources of their own.[10] Naqvi identifies four types of towns in Mughal Hindustan-administrative centres, commercial towns, centres of pilgrimage, and towns with particular industries. The decline of towns and cities was due to political disorders and not due to any internal development in the urban areas. She refutes the idea that towns were parasitical. According to her, towns and villages were interdependent, working in mutual coordination so that prosperity or stagnation of one immediately produced corresponding response in the other. The artisans served as the productive base of urban economic life while his products constituted one of the chief sources through which the towns could eventually acquire an independent economic status.

B. D. Chattopadhyay, after taking documentary evidence from the Indo-Gangetic divide, the Upper Ganga basin and the Malwa plateau concluded that there are signs of urbanization in widely distant areas under the Gurjara Pratiharas. Before emerging as fully developed urban centres, all these sites were central points in local commerce indicating a developmental process that did not preclude long-distance contacts. Within the urban centres, there was marked differentiation in terms of morphology and demography. The guilds of traders possibly cut across the frontiers of caste and region. Thus, the evidence suggests continuity of inland trade and urbanization.

R. Champalakshmi looks upon early medieval south India as a distinct phase in the history of urbanization in the south. Here, urbanization was the result mainly of external trade and most urban centres were actually trade enclaves. The *brahmadeya* (Brahmin controlled land) and the temple served as the basis of agricultural expansion and the source of surplus for the growth of urban centres. Trade and commodity production began to promote the growth of towns. The market or commercial centres called *nagarams* began to increase with the pressing need of market facilities from the early Chola period. Equally important was the organization of commerce by corporate trading communities referred to as guilds. Prominent among them were Five Hundred, Manigramam and Anjuvannam which were encouraged by the rulers. Apart from trade and commercial activities, the presence of religious institutions was a necessary concomitant of the urban process. Shaivism became an instrument of acculturation for acquiring a wider popular base. The worship of the linga as the royal cult of the Cholas was of central importance in this acculturation.

Taking the illustration of Agra, I will now analyse whether the city's urbanisation process falls under any of the conceptual framework or whether this attempt to generalise the urbanisation processes of different areas is problematic or not. Though 'certain structural elements are universal for all urban centres', it is not possible to equate the experiences of urbanization of the two worlds.

The city of Agra is believed to have emerged suddenly on the medieval Indian scene, apparently as a result of a whimsical decision of Lodi Sultan Sikandar Shah of Delhi in 1506 to build a city on the site. Scholars have analysed Agra's development and emergence into a major urban centre of medieval India by concentrating on geo-political factors. They have highlighted the strategic advantage of its position vis-a-vis eastern Rajasthan's Rajput princely states and in relation to the Malwa region. However geo-political factors alone are hardly adequate to explain this phenomenon.

The seventeenth century sources characterise Agra as the most important exchange centre in northern India. It acted as the convergence point for routes from all directions. It had developed as a sub-continental node for regional and long-distance trade and communications and as an important place of manufacture. These confluences, including the city's political role, resulted in the emergence of a number of social groups and institutions.

The flow of commercial traffic was so considerable that it turned Agra into a great exchange centre for a large variety of products. As a result, market centres dealing with specific commodities emerged in different parts of the city. Such voluminous trade gave rise to a complex monetary system. The intense political and economic activities in the city of Agra acted as a great attraction and pull to all types of professional groups of people and led to development of different social groups and institutions. The city thus kept expanding both in size and population. The city of Agra was considered the largest and most populous city of the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century.[11]

A multi-dimensional approach has to be adopted to the study of the problem of origin of Agra and its development as a political capital. By the time Agra became the capital, it had already attained a prominent position among the urban centres of north India. In other words, the genesis of the city was implicitly assumed to have derived from its multiple functions as a city. Thus the choice of Agra as the political capital of the

[10] Reeta Grewal, 'Urbanisation in Medieval India', pp. 406-408.

[11] K.K. Trivedi, 'The Emergence of Agra as a Capital and a City', pp. 161-162.

Sultanate in the sixteenth century was neither sudden nor arbitrary. In a way it was a positive response to the potential which Agra offered for wielding control over resources, both from the agricultural produce and in the form of commercial traffic.

Ashraf's argument about rise of cities is just part of the larger picture. Political patronage can help the city only so much. It needs to be recognised that there were signs of urbanisation in India before the coming of the Turks though the process definitely was accelerated after them. Naqvi's categorisation of towns into administrative centres, commercial towns, centres of pilgrimage, and towns with particular industries falls short as exceptions can be found. Similarly, Champakalakshmi's characterization of urbanisation of the south as 'temple urbanism' is limited and specific.

In the case of the city of Agra, it showed continuity in urbanization process; a process accelerated by its selection as the capital. Attempts to understand this process by referring to Western concepts is problematic as it fails to reveal the distinct social, economic and political processes that stimulated the rise of cities. However, this does not imply that the Western models have to be rejected completely. Themes put forward by these scholars help to structure the argument better. For example, it can be analysed whether towns were open, closed or subject towns or whether they were generative or parasitic, etc. Thus the best way to understand the specificity of the urban phenomena, at least in historical pre-modern societies, is to analyse them in their specific contexts.

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