Historiographic Understanding of Cities in Medieval India

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Since the beginning historians as well as sociologist are trying to look into the basic nature of urban process. In medieval world, in all aspects of life like political, economy, social and territorial structure, urbanization played an important role. Max Weber was the first to give his theory about the western medieval cities. He noticed that unlike ancient Greek and roman cities, which were mainly centers of consumption, western medieval cities were centers of production. When the process of production met with exchange, it started giving priority to the interest of producers and traders.[1] There by creating a launching pad for the development of capitalism. These urban dwellers consisting of producers and traders uprooted the feudal authorities. Max Weber saw medieval cities as a place which had dominance of trade and commerce with a market and a court having partially autonomous law. The city was a remarkable settlement. It was a habitat as well as the place for work. It has the capacity to be a capital and an organized area. The elite class used to control each and every aspect of the city.

The early historians like Henri Pirene and M.M.Pastan mainly dealt with the role of towns in the early medieval period. Whereas writers like Fernand Braudle, Richerd Gascon, Jan De Vries etc, worked on the socio-economic aspect and process of Urbanization from 15th to 18th century. Historians focused on two main factors to distinguish townships from villages. First, the size or dimensions of the settlement as towns were generally bigger than villages. And second is presence of permanent market structure involving a large group of population working in it. They generally produced craft rather than getting involved in agro-centric works like villages. Fernand Braudel focused on the second aspect that is the existence of markets in the town. He said "every town whenever it may be, is first or foremost a market. If there is no market, a town is inconvincible".[2]

Later on, historians realized that all medieval towns in Western Europe did not have the same economic and political value. So putting them in the same category will be wrong. Henri Pirenne divided medieval cities into two different categories, towns of Liege type and Flemish type.[3] Liege type towns were governed by bishop or his court, with the help of few

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[1] Pius Malekandathi, 'Medieval Cities: Theoretical Perception and Meaning', in Yogesh Sharma and Pius malekandathi, ed, *Cities in Medieval India*, New Delhi, 2014, pp-2

[2] Yogesh Sharma, 'The City in Medieval India', in Yogesh Sharma and Pius malekandathi, ed, *Cities in Medieval India*, New Delhi, 2014, Pp-24

[3] Ibid, Pp-3

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artisans and servants who provided his citizens with finished goods. It was more of an oligarchic rule. Fernand Barudel moved a step forward than Henri Pirenne and divided these towns in three basic groups.[4] One open town like Greece and Rome, which were at times differentiated from their hinterland and in other blending into it. Second closed towns, those were self-sufficient. The walls of these towns marked the boundaries of their individual way of life. And third type was the towns like Florence and Paris, subject towns which were held in the gamut of subjection by prince and state. Historians also realized that nature of division of labor can be other aspect by which a town can be differentiated.

In India the hyperactive commercial and manufacturing aspect of Indian economy needed a strong urban segment with highly emerged market townships in all regions of the subcontinent and Coastal regions in particular. Contemporary observers noted that general pattern of settlement of villages and towns were dense and regular in most of its part.

Jean De Thevenot during his stay in India, notices that many villages were located in closer distance were as cities and towns were located at greater distance. On the contrary, Abdur Razzak said he came across a number If cities each day during his journey. As the usual distance covered in a day in medieval times was 20-30 miles. It shows that India was a well urbanized place. Petro Delta Valle and Francois Martin argued that large sized families lived in India. This contributed to the demographic and habitation pattern of India. Towns were considered as healthy settlements and their countryside showed its revenue surplus. Thevenot by giving the examples of Agra and Vijaynagra showed how towns were looked upon as indicators of social-cultural, economic and political wellbeing of the province.[5]

In India, Mohammed Habib started an academic debate on medieval Indian cities.[6] He argued that there was a sudden spurt of labor process in North India started by the conquest of Mohammad Ghori. It led to urban revolution in medieval times. However, he views this labor process as a result of external factor that is political conquest by Mohammad Ghori. He explains that the low caste Indian workers, who till Mohammad Ghori lived outside the walls of cities, came in with the forces of Ghori. They provided services in government and manufacturing as fighting forces and labors to produce finished goods. This new rule undermined all the discrimination against city workers. The religion on Islam acted as a magnet which attracted workers to come to city for different tasks. Workers of *karkhanas*, artisans, personal servants, dancing girls etc. formed a large part of work force available in town.

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[4] *Opt.cit* Pius Malekandathi, Pp-3

[5] Ibid, Pp-29

[6] Ibid, pp-5-6

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Irfan Habib on the other hand says that this up rise in the labor recourse in 13th and 14th century was not because of the liberation of any segment of the society. But because of innovations made in technology and formation of new ruling class who used to spend a large part of revenue appropriated in towns, where they resided.[7] He explains that slave tradition was residing in almost all domains of production in Indian towns during this period. B.D. Chattopadhyaya while focusing on north-west India found that a large number of towns emerged in Indo Gangatic divide, the upper ganga basin and Malwa region during 9th to 14 th century. He considered trade as an important reason in their origin.[8]

R.Champakalakshmi on the other hand focused on South India examining several towns during the period of ninth to thirteenth century. She also considered external trade as an important factor for their rise. Thought she mentions that unlike Northern Indian towns these towns were not alike. Some were mercantile centers while others were ceremonial-cum- religious towns. She suggested the revival of long-distance sea trade in tenth century caused the rise of many coastal towns in Andhra and Southern Karnataka.[9]

The medieval Indian cities acted a pivotal nerve center having control over an extensive macro region. These cities later evolved into large kingdoms and sultanates. Thanjavure, Vijaynagra, Agra, Shahjahanabad, Lucknow etc are some examples of such cities. A number of researches have been done on the issue of difference between town and cities in Tamil history of medieval period. Different names were used to show these differences between the settlements like *ur, graman* for village, *pattanam, puram* for town and *mahapattanam, nagaram* for city.[10]

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[7] *Opt. cit* Pius Malekandathi, Pp-6

[8] Ibid, Pp 7

[9] Ibid, Pp 8-10

[10] S.Jeyaseela Stephen, 'thanjavur:the making of a medieval metropolis' in Yogesh Shrama in Pius Malekandathi, ed, *cities in medieval India*, new Delhi, 2014, Pp-210

[11] Ibid, Pp 6-7

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Historian Burton Stein emphasize on Vijayanagara was the transitional phase from medieval past to modern era.[12] Stein argues that Vijayanagara underwent transformations. Beginning with Devaraya II (1424-46), but particularly in the reign of Krishnadevaraya (1509- 29), there were increased attempts to centralize the state system. This led to the emergence of a new class called *amara-nayaka* (dependent political leaders). Their authority was generated by the center itself. Stein says that this development was different from medieval times where sovereignty was shared between king and lesser kings.[13] This justifies that Vijayanagara Empire was in segmentary state unlike the cholas of south India during eleventh and twelfth century. This was a typical situation where the society was moving toward the early modern features. But its head state system remained medieval. So, stain mentions that "it is difficult to identify the ways in which Vijayanagara as a state made a difference".[14]

After Agra, which remained capital for a very long time, Shahjahanbad rose as the next urban center. This walled city of Delhi was founded by Shahjahan in 1639. Mughl Empire learned many lessons from the experiences it had in Agra and used it in Shahjahanabad.

By 17th century, with the rise of its power some complexities in the field social religion, politics etc. came into view. This is being explored by many historians. Urban history pattern like morphology was used to have an idea about the development of the city. Morphology nearly has three stages. Namely: Morphogenesis, Histogenesis and pattern formation. It plays a helping role in maintaining certain equilibrium about the subject while simultaneously engaging with the multidimensional facts of the city.

S.Mitra Chenoy presents a massive morphological progress in Shahjahanabad. She concentrated on two elements.[15] One being planned and developed space while other being planned but undeveloped space. She explains that river Yamuna was on the right side of the city. The city was also surrounded by hills from all the sides. Fort in front of Yamuna shows that it was planned and developed. There were wide and broad streets, *bhags* (garden), *havelis* (mansions) etc. *Bazars* in many parts of the city was also the place of attraction. Moreover, all the other places to fulfill the requirements of the people of the city like health institutions, public spaces pools educational spaces *sarais*, worship places were present in the city. But in some other parts of city, we do not find places which developed like the rest of the city. These were planned and undeveloped part of the city. People made their houses in this part without

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[12] Burton Stein, The New Cambridge History of India, Vijaynagra, South Asia, 1993, Pp- XI

[13] Ibid, Pp-63

[14] Ibid, Pp-110

[15] Shama Mitra Chenoy, 'Shahjahanabad: A Medieval Indian experience' in Yogesh Sharma and PiusMalekandathi, ed, *cities in medieval India*, new Delhi, 2014, Pp-163

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any plan as such. *Havelis* here were changed to *muhallas* by continuous changing of its owner. The problem of sanctity was also there in these areas. The fort of king encompassed with pride of the place in location and size. It was a great example of planned and developed urban space. Fort was close to Yamuna, there were central *bazars*, palaces, gates etc.

Shahjahanabad provided shelter to different culture. High and low cultural spaces expanded together. It had elite and middle-class society. But culture was not subject to class. The traditions were presented as need of people. People from different regions came to Shahjahanabad to settle down and this was a continuous process of people migrating to Delhi. These people belonged to different caste and culture. Who adopted the other traditions to move upward in the society. Thus, this upward and downward social mobility was clearly visible in Shahjahanabad. Social gathering and celebrations were rejoiced by the people by watching royal processions. Orthodoxy emerged here as other feature. Glimpse of heterodoxy was visible rather than conformity. For ex: coexistence of *sufi sarmad, shah madar, charndasis, khanqahs and darghas*. There were also some conflicts between people of different communities in Shahjahanabad.

The collection writings by Max weber and Marx describes how urban communities had their own distinctive style and character, dependent on a particular kind of state organization.[16] The most attracting feature of the study of S.Blake is using the theory of max weber in the context of Indian cities.[17] Blake presented Shahjahanabad as a sovereign city and a capital of patrimonial bureaucratic state on the basis of Max weber work.[18] In the views of Stephen Blake this city was a patrimonial bureaucrat city because here citizens and nobility was controlled by the emperor by declaring him the protector or patron. All the work belonging to economy, Society, culture or construction was done on the orders of the king. The capital acted as the mansion of the king, were everything else acted as his subordinate. Max weber presented an assumption of urban communities in medieval European cities had the features like predominance of trade, merchant associations partial and political autonomy etc. but pre- modern Indian cities lacked these features. He asserts "mere princely camps or formless undifferentiated globe of villagers ready to dissolve at a moment" on the contrary Blake says. They were urban communities with active style and character depending on a particular kind of state organization". The most attracting feature of the study of S.Blake is using the theory

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[16] Ibid, Pp-XIV

[17] Ibid, Pp-XII

[18] Shama Mitra Chenoy, 'Shahjahanabad: A medieval Indian experience' in Yogesh Sharma and PiusMalekandathi, ed, *cities in medieval India*, new Delhi, 2014, Pp-17

of max weber in the context of Indian cities. Blake presented Shahjahanabad as a sovereign city and a capital of patrimonial bureaucratic state on the basis of max weber work. He also marks Shahjahanabad as an *Islamic* state. The minarets, domes and mosque including *jama masjid* dominated the construction part of the city as they marked the religion of the rulers. As a result of this gradually state became the reflection of *islam*. The king lived and ruled by divine right. The city was called *dar-ul-islam* or *dur-ul-khalifa*. These names and slogans helped to increase the dominance of king over other things as he was linked to God. The city was symbol of ruler's legitimacy over his competitors and enemies.

Shama Mitra Chenoy ask a very important question related to this. She says "are we supposed to think of a city as a painting or an architectural expression that the imperial vision could be articulated in its execution"?[19] The answer to this question is indeed no. and if by a single percent the answer could be yes that also architecture is the last thing which explains about the imperial vision. City is emerged from the content of actions and responses. Cities like Shahjahanabad can be categorized in multiple ways as it represents an incredibly large number of contradictions. So, we can say that Shahjahanabad is not a solitary example.

As Agra and Shahjahanabad played an importation role in northern India in early centuries. In the same way in mid nineteenth century the urban panorama in northern India was dominated by Lucknow. It was the capital of the nawab of *Awadh*.

The city displayed a number of urban features like rich markets, military, architecture and trade. W.H. Russell focuses on the architecture of the city.[20] He describes about the architecture of places, *minars* and domes etc. Some western observers explain how architecture of some of its principal buildings gave Lucknow an unduly exotic appearance. Lucknow served as the administrative and cultural core of the vast and rich region. It also was the center of its voluminous grain trade. The palaces, garden, complex, mosques and many gateways etc were constructed by the nawab. There were many markets in lucknow. Bazaara like *kandahari* and *chini* were associated with foreign trade. For goods like vegetables, timber, grass and coal etc. *Mandi* or wholesale markets were established. *Imambara*, the *chawk* and dozens of major markets formed the core of the royal city. Lucknow not only shows the effect of nawabi tradition in its culture. But also tell the story what happened after the British rule took over in after 1857. It transformed for a semi medieval city to a pre- industrial and then into a model colony, in a short period of time. According to Neena Talwar and olden burg the smell of the

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[19] Shama Mitra Chenoy, 'Shahjahanabad: A Medieval Indian experience' in Yogesh Sharma and PiusMalekandathi, ed, *cities in medieval India*, new Delhi, 2014, Pp-174

[20] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, the making of colonial Lucknow 1855-1877, New Jersey, 1984, Pp- 10-11

transformation that happened here after the mutiny of 1857 still prevails in the city. And using this she challenges the views of the extent of British intervention in India after 1857.[21] She explains that may be neutral political, social, economic and physical changes which were made in the city at that time had left an aggressive and purposive control in the hands of the population. And on the basis of social welfare, the contemporary administrators accepted it.

Colonel Robert Corneluis Napier created the settings of military and civil power in the city. *Asafi imambara* and *jamamasjid* and Friday Mosque was taken over for the use of military. A new civic design was imposed to perceive needs of political control. Municipal taxation was imposed on people. This kind of direct taxation was not there at the time of nawab. The unfairness of these taxes also added to the injury of the people. Regular tax called octrai was replaced by the new tax called *chungi*.[22] It was a kind of sale tax placed on goods. Though it did not take into consideration whether the goods were sold or not. In case goods were send to other city for sale. Traders had to pay additional tax on it. The collectors of the tax were corrupt officials.

The royal quarter, *machi bhawan* and lesser palaces were the hub of the administration and military elite. The nobility created their own residential palaces, mohallas, mosque and bazars. The merchants, traders and craftsmen were attracted toward these areas for the business. Thus the city replicated itself in miniature around these areas where nobility and military and administrators resided. In the words of S.P Blake the *amiri* mansions or *amiri mohalla* formed the dominant form of residential organization with in the city.[23] And these organizations gave economic life to the city. But in case of Lucknow after the advent of British rule. These *mohallas* were destroyed, which formed the core of the city.

Medieval Indian cities had occupies varieties in their identities like Thanjavur immerged political center and over time changed into a commercial center as well. It fits into Fernand Barudel theory that every town must have a market. The city had rich markets. Vijaynagra on the other hand had an impressive architecture of temples. B. Stein describes this city as "royal cum scared city". Commercial and financial developments are visible in the city. Northern cities like Agra developed under the Mughals. Max Weber saw such cities as a place which had dominance of trade and commerce with a market and a court. Agra immerged as due to political reasons. But later on it accumulated a lot of economic means, there by growing into one of the most trivial commercial center of India. This can be seen by the trade routes at

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[21] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, the making of colonial Lucknow 1855-1877, New Jersey, 1984, Pp- XIV-XXI

[22] Opt cit, Veena Talwar, Pp.153

[23] Ibid. Pp-14

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that time. Shahjahanabad fits into the analysis of Henri Piernne. He describes a liege type city. Shahjahanabad's economic set up helped it to become the best commercial center of that time. S.Blake examined it as a bureaucratic state. Some other scholars also explained other aspects of Shahjahanabad. Its morphology presents the glimpse of indo-islamic culture. Colonial city of Lucknow also captures our attention in terms of its construction. V.Talwar presented a view of Lucknow during British rule post-mutiny. The constructions done by them in the city shows their efforts to stop any such accident in the future. It also shows how fearful they were of the idea of revolt. In the end cities can be recognized as indicator of economic growth and social change showing different things in different historical periods and regional context. One needs to understand causes and effects of the emergence of city and the circumstances prevailed in it, to decipher the true importance of these cities.