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# UNIT 14 TRADE, TRADING NETWORKS AND URBANISATION: NORTH INDIA, C. AD 300 - C. AD 1300

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## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Our previous survey of trade and urbanization for nearly nine centuries (*c.* 600 BC-AD 300) indicates a steady development in exchange related activities and in proliferation of urban centres in north India. The five hundred years preceding the fourth century AD mark the peak of commerce, especially long-distance trade, and urbanization in north India. Conventional historiography generally gives an impression of steady continuity and little change in economic life in the period that follows: *c.* AD 300-1300. This is a position which in the recent decades has been questioned by many leading historians. It is indeed possible to discern a few significant shifts both in the agrarian and non-agrarian sectors of the economy. That is why it is better to study the economic situation of these thousand years as a separate unit. In view of the changes occurring in social, economic, political and cultural life during these thousand years in north India, it would be logical to divide the millennium from AD 300 to AD 1300 into two chronological segments: *c.* AD 300-650 and AD 650-1300. (For details see our Course EHI-03, Block-1).

The period from AD 300 to AD 650 has attracted great attention of scholars who generally designate this phase as the Gupta period or the classical age in Indian history. The period indeed witnessed the rise of the imperial Gupta family to political paramountcy over greater parts of north India (*c.* AD 320-570). The first half of the seventh century is famous in the political history of northern India for the growth of the power of Harshavardhana of Kanauj, though for a limited period. The period

(300-650) is celebrated in Indian historiography for great cultural achievements and general peace and prosperity. While in the previous period a substantial part of cultural patronage came from non-royal persons, from the fourth century onwards, and especially after seventh century, resources to cultural activities came mainly from the royal houses. This itself is an indicator of significant changes in the socio-cultural situations.

The six centuries and a half, spanning from c. AD 650 to 1300, brought in regional features in socio-economic, political and cultural life in the whole of India, including north India. The political scene was featured by the presence of many regional and local powers in north India and the lack of a paramount power like the Gupta Empire in north India. This holds also true for the political situation in the Deccan and the far south. In spite of endemic clashes among powers, military victories did not necessarily result in territorial expansion. Regional and local powers emerged not merely in the Ganga valley, but also in hitherto fringe zones like, Kamarupa (upper Assam), Samatata (eastern Bengal), Dahala (Jabalpur area in Madhya Pradesh), Kashmir and Rajasthan. Many of these areas did not experience a monarchical polity prior to AD 600. The sustenance of the extensive Gupta Empire for nearly two centuries and a half and the proliferation of monarchical states in many new areas in north India must have come from a strong agrarian base. In fact the immense spread of agrarian economy during the period from AD 300 to 1300 has led to an impression that the economy was greatly ruralised; the non-agrarian sector of the economy, according to many historians underwent a decline from AD 600-1000. It is after AD 1000 that crafts, commerce and urban centres are perceived to have revived again. This perception has generated considerable scholarly controversies. It will be difficult to miss the growing regional features permeating social, economic, cultural and political situations. That is why the period from 650-1300 is labelled as post-Gupta or 'early medieval' in Indian history. The very phrase early medieval implies that the period signalled shifts from the situation in the 'ancient' times; it was actually a phase marking the transition from the ancient to the medieval and hence termed 'early medieval'.

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## 14.2 SOURCES

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That the period under survey was marked with many shifts from the previous period is also indicated by new types of source materials and documents which themselves were witnesses to changing condition. The most important source material for the study of this period is the huge number of inscriptions. Inscriptions had already appeared as early as the third century BC. But most inscriptions after fourth century belonged to the category of copper plates (*tamrasasana/tamrapatta*). These copper plates recorded transfer of revenue-free landed property by royal orders to recipients of the grant. Though this practice probably appeared first in the Deccan around second century AD, the practice of issuing land grants became fully established from the fourth century onwards and assumed an all-India proportion after AD 600. Most of the copper plates record the creation of revenue-free grant of land gifted to a brahmana, a group of brahmanas or a religious institution (a Buddhist monastery, a brahmanical temple or a *matha* or a Jaina establishment). Such grant of land to religious donees (recipients of endowments) is known as *agraharas*. Being official records of grants of landed property, the copper plates are invaluable for understanding of rural economy, especially for understanding the process of transfer of landed property, rural settlement pattern, crops, irrigation projects,

peasants and agrarian revenue demands. However, on some occasions the grant may also throw light on important merchants and craftsmen whose presence as important witnesses to the pious act of donation of land was recorded. Merchants also figure in copper plate grants in a group or as an assembly on certain auspicious days when the merchants decided to voluntarily offer some cesses on the commodities they dealt in in favour of a deity or temple. In such grants naturally appear not only merchants but also various types of commodities. These inscriptions also inform us about various types of market places from some of which were collected tolls and customs (*sulka*), thereby indicating the revenue bearing potential of trade. Also known are inscriptions recording individual donations by merchants, either in favour of a deity or for some works of public benefactions.

Information on trade and urban centres is available from voluminous legal or theoretical treatises (*sastras/dharmasastras*). Theoretical treatises (*smritis*) by Vishnu, Vasishtha, Brihaspati and Narada will be useful for our purpose. Commentaries on these texts (e.g. the commentaries on the *Manusmriti* and *Yajnavalkyasmriti*) also offer some data on this subject. Relevant data can be gleaned from technical treatises like the famous lexicon, *Amarakosa* by Amarasimha (fifth-sixth centuries AD), the *Abhidhanachintamani* and the *Desinamamala* by Hemachandra (eleventh-twelfth century) and the *Lekhapaddhati*. Some impressions of commercial activities are available in the vast creative literature, e.g. the works of Kalidasa, the *Mrcchakatikam* of Sudraka, the *Dasakumaracharita* of Dandin and various types of Jain texts. It is important to take note of the fact that two well known Jaina texts *Jagaducharita* and *Vastupalamahatmyam* were biographies of two premier merchants of early medieval Gujarat. Non-indigenous textual materials are of particular importance as source materials for the history of trade, especially the external trade of India. The Chinese accounts of Fa-hsien (early fifth century AD), Hsuan Tsang (first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century), Itsing (late seventh century) and Chau ju Kua (AD 1225) are invaluable sources for the understanding of trade in India. Arabic and Persian texts on geography and travel (those by Sulaiman (c. 851), ibn Khordadbeh (AD 882), al Masudi (AD 915), Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (AD 995), the anonymous author of *Hudud al Alam* (AD 982), al Biruni (AD 973-1048), and al Idrisi (AD 1162) are replete with information on Indian commodities and India's trade linkages with West Asia, though these accounts are occasionally stereotyped as many of the Arab authors did not visit India. To this may be added the late sixth century AD accounts of the Syrian Christian monk Cosmas Indicopleustes and the famous descriptions of India by the Venetian traveller Marco Polo (late thirteenth century). An unusual type of source is the letters of medieval Jewish traders, who regularly traded between the west coast of India and the Red Sea. Though the main point of their contacts was the Karnataka and Malabar coasts, these unique business letters, recording the impressions of the actual participants in long-distance trade, furnish significant data on trade in the Gujarat coast.

In sharp contrast to the wealth of field archaeological data for the period from 600 BC to AD 300, the subsequent period of one millennium has yielded only handful of excavated and explored materials. Unlike the early historical settlements, the early medieval ones have not been systematically explored and excavated and therefore the field archaeological data on trade and urbanisation are quite inadequate. The Gupta rulers are credited with the issuance of superb

gold coins and also silver coins. The gold coinage of the Gupta Emperors was imitated by a number of smaller powers in the seventh century AD. But coins of precious metal (gold and silver) became fewer in the early medieval times than those in the preceding centuries. Minting of quality coins was limited to a handful number of places in north India; it is after AD 1000 that the issuance of precious coinage once again revived. Numismatic sources thus offer lesser data than that furnished by early historical coins. This itself has been interpreted by some scholars as a prime indication of dwindling commerce, especially foreign trade of India during the 600-1000 period. The evidence of coins found in some parts of India during the early medieval times will be discussed in the relevant section.

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### 14.3 TRADE, MARKET PLACES AND URBAN CENTRES AD 300-650

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India's thriving commerce with the Roman world seems to have declined after c. AD 250; there was perhaps a lesser demand for Indian products in the West and the volume of trade seems to have declined. The fall of the Kushana empire around c. AD 262 could have also contributed to the lesser volume of external trade of north India during the period. These shifts in the trade scenario, however, should not imply any major crisis in the commercial transactions within India and in north India.

#### 14.3.1 Merchants

Thus the famous lexicographer, Amarasimha explains trade as *kraya-vikraya* (purchase and sale of commodities). As before, *vanik* (trader in general), *sresthi* (very rich merchant, possibly banker or money merchant), and *sarthavaha* (leader of the caravan traders) continue to be active in this period. Following the strict *varna* code they could be assigned the status of *vaisyas*. But trading activities on some occasions transgressed the strict *varna* norms. Thus two merchant brothers, Bhrikutivarma and Achalavarma appear in an inscription of AD 466 (of the time of Skandagupta) as pious donors (of cash) to a Sun temple at Indrapura (modern Indore, Bulandshahr district, Uttar Pradesh); they were of *kshatriya* origin and hence described as *kshatriya-vanik*. Such violation of strict *varna* code neither brought them any disrepute, nor was their donation unacceptable to the shrine. Three such *vaniks*, Saktinaga, Kumaranaga and Skandanaga, patronized another sun temple in the present eastern part of Madhya Pradesh. They appear in the early sixth century not in the Ganga valley but in the ancient territory of Dahala (near Jabalpur) which was located in a forest tract (*atavirajya*). In two inscriptions of early sixth century from the same area figure a merchant (*vanik*) and a craftsman (*karu*). These instances speak of the active presence of merchants not merely in the Ganga Valley but also in the relatively isolated region of Central India. Following the profession of a merchant was so common that the hero of the famous drama *Mrichchhakatikam*, Charudatta, was a trader though born in a brahmana family (*vipra-sartha*; *vipra*= brahmana and *sartha* being an abbreviation of *sarthavaha*). The drama in fact describes that Charudatta's father and grandfather too were merchants. Though they were of brahmana origin they resided in the quarter of the city assigned to the merchants (*Sreshthi-chatvare*) *Sarthavahas* and *sresthis* figure consistently in five Gupta copper plates from Damodarpur (in northern part of Bangladesh), which was included in the

Pundravardhana *bhukti* (province) of the Gupta Empire. These copper plates are dated from c. AD 443-44 to AD 543-44 (i.e. a century). The actual term referred to in these inscriptions is *nagarasresthi*. *Nagara* stands for a city and *sresthi* the chief merchant; the term therefore is taken to mean the chief merchant of the city, possibly of the city of Kotivarsha (identified with the archaeological site of Bangarh, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal) from where the records were issued. The term *nagarasresthi* has also been explained as the chief banker or money merchant, as the *sresthi* was often a very rich merchant investing cash in different business. Along with the *nagarasresthi* appears the *sarthavaha* or the leader of the caravan merchants in the copper plates of the Gupta period from north Bengal. The significant point to note is that the *nagarasresthi* and the *sarthavaha* were members of the district level administrative board (*vishayadhisthana*), assisting the district officer (*vishayapati*). The district administrator was a distinct officer, appointed by the provincial governor (*uparika* or *uparika-maharaja*) of Pundravardhanabhukti, who in his turn was appointed by the reigning Gupta emperor himself. The *nagarasresthi* and the *sarthavaha*, on the other hand, were not salaried officers of the Gupta provincial government in north Bengal. They appear to have been inducted to the district board as representatives of their respective professional organisations. This would logically imply that in north Bengal there were not only important merchants but mercantile organizations or bodies too. Leaders of such merchants' bodies were important enough to be considered as members of a district board without being salaried staff of the state. The system, in vogue for at least a century, certainly speaks of the importance of merchants in the social and political set up of north Bengal in the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

The prominent role of merchants (in association with craftsmen) is however not merely confined to north Bengal. As many as 270 seals and/or sealings have been found from Vaisali (north Bihar) and assigned to the Gupta period. These seals belonged to professional bodies of merchants and artisans (*Sresthi-Sarthavaha-Kulika nigama*)/*prathama-kulika*, etc.) The term *nigama* denotes a professional organization and is synonymous with *sreni*. It is likely that at vaishali merchants, caravan traders and artisans had their respective professional organizations. Besides these, there was also another larger body as a federation of professional organizations (*Sresthi Sarthavaha-kulika-nigama*).

Epigraphic evidence therefore strongly undershine that merchants were organized in their respective *sreni* like bodies. The cooperative character (*Samuha*) of such bodies is particularly emphasised in the *Dharmasastras* of Brhaspati and Narada. According to Brahaspati, as and when a new member was inducted in a *sreni*, he had undergo a few processes: i) *Kosla* or a test to ascertain his moral character, ii) *Lekhakriya* written undertaking by the new member to abide by rules and regulation of the body, iii) *Madhyastha*: the required presence of a person who knew thoroughly the new member. The *Dharmastra* repeatedly emphasize on the compactness of the organisation. It was expect that each and every member of the *sreni* would ensure equal investment to the organization. If a member causes harm to the *sreni*, in spite of the objections levelled against him by other members, the accused member was to compensate any loss suffered by the *sreni*. A member violating the terms and conditions of the organization (*samvit vyatikrama*) had to face legal actions. The *Dharmasastra* also strongly uphold that the laws of the *sreni* were at par with the laws of the land. In other words, an accused member of the *sreni*, was to be tried according to the laws of the *sreni*.

#### Gupta Copper Plate Grant From Damodarpur

On the 15th (?)th day of Phalguna, in the regnal year ..... While *parama-daivata*, *parama-bhattacharaka*, *maharajadhiraja* **Sri Budha-gupta** was (the ruler of the earth), and while in the *vishaya* of **Kotivarsha**, prospering under the government of *uparika-maharaja* **Jayadatta** in the *bhukti* of **Pundravardhana**, who was favoured by his Majesty, the *ayuktaka* **Sandaka (Gandaka?)**, appointed by him (Jayadatta), was administering the affairs of the town (*adhishtana*), in the company of (i.e. with the help of) *nagara-sreshthin* Ribhupala, the merchant Vasumittra, the chief *kulika* Varadatta, and the chief scribe Viprapala, whereas application was made by this *sreshthin* Ribhupala thus – “In **Donga-grama** in **Himavach-*chhikhara*** (lit. the summit of the Himalaya) 4 *kulyavapas of aprada* lands were formerly given by me to Kokamukha-svamin and 7 *kulyavapas* to Svetavaraha-svamin, in the hope of benefit to myself (and) for the sake of increasing religious merits; now in the neighbourhood of those cultivated lands I wish to build two temples and their two store-rooms for those supreme gods Kokamukha-svamin and Svetavaraha-svamin (and?) one *namalingam* (?). So it behoves you to give (me) *kulyavapas* with *vastu* (building-grounds) in accordance with the prevailing custom of sale.”

Rradhagovinda Basak, ‘The five Damodarpur Copper-Plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period’, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 15, 1982, New Delhi, Plate No. 4 (tr.), pp. 140-41.

### 14.3.2 Guilds

Professional organizations were known in the legal literature and also in inscriptions as *srenis*, often loosely translated as ‘guilds’. Such *srenis* in our sources are mostly organisations of craftsmen and service groups, but only occasionally of merchants. A particular body of merchants, named *vaniggrama*, prominently figures in three inscriptions from western India dated in the sixth century. The term *vaniggrama* does not denote a village or settlement of merchants, but a professional body of merchants (*grama* in the sense of a collection or collective body). A perusal of the mercantile organization *vaniggrama* will be in order here. In two inscriptions from Sanjeli (Gujarat), dated AD 503 and 506 the *vaniggrama* figures prominently. More elaborate information is available from the inscription of AD 503. This record enlists the names merchants converging at Vadrपाली. There is little doubt that the mercantile organisation in question consisted of both local (*vastavya*) and non-local traders, the latter coming from various places (*caturdisabhyagatakavaidesya*). Of the thirteen merchants explicitly mentioned in the record, some came from as far as Kanyakubja (modern Kanauj) and Ujjayini. The name of merchant, Gdusuyebhassam-from Ujjayini-is distinctly non-Indian. The traders met at the house (*grhavastu*) of merchant (*vanijaka*) Shashthi who was possibly a local merchant at Vadrपाली. The merchants’ group decided to pay voluntary cesses on certain commodities in favour of a Vishnu temple. It appears that three years later, in AD 506, Shashthi donated his own house (*svadiyagrihavastu*) to the same Vaishnava temple (*paramadevatabhagavatayatana*). The commodities handled by the members of *vaniggrama* at Vadrपाली were mostly bulk items of daily necessities. Interestingly, many of the cesses were levied in cash, more precisely in silver coins (*rupinikas*, *vimsopanikas*), although some items like, oil was levied in kind. The *vaniggrama* looms large in the third inscription from Gujarat, dated AD 592. This charter, issued by the Maitraka ruler Vishnushena at Lohatagrama in western Gujarat, records a number of privileges for the *vaniggrama* who by such concessions were expected to be settled down (*acharasthitipatra*) at Lohatagrama. All the seventy two clauses in

the inscription are related to the activities of the vaniggrama merchants. That these merchants undertook trips to land abroad, possibly by sea-going vessels (vahitras) is indicated in the record of AD 592. The inscription informs us about various types of indigenous modes of transportation, including ferry services, and different types of craft-products (e.g. bamboo-working, leather-working, and indigo production) which were levied cesses at fixed rates.

### 14.3.3 Market Places

Different terms appear in our sources to denote centres of exchanges. This implies the existence of different types of market places. Ordinary rural level centres of trade were called hatta. In an inscription of AD 507 from Comilla region, Bangladesh, figures a dosihatta or a centre for textile trade. The market place is mentioned also as vipani in Kalidasa's work. Kalidasa seems to have meant shops by the term apana. The shop selling intoxicating liquor is known as saundikapanam and the street leading to shops is mentioned as apanamarga. Classical Sanskrit literature is replete with accounts of highways flanked by prosperous shops (riddhapanam rajapatham).

### 14.3.4 Trade Routes

Merchants seem to have traversed well established routes of overland communications to reach different places in north India. North Indian plains, especially the Ganga basin and the Ganga delta, must have offered facilities of riverine communications. A perusal of the travels of two well known Chinese pilgrims, Fahsien in the early fifth century and Hsuan Tsang in the first half of the seventh century, demonstrates that greater parts of north India, stretching from the northwestern borderlands to the Bengal delta and Kamarupa in the Brahmaputra valley, were connected by traditional routes. Needless to add there were numerous difficulties of communications and hazards of unsafe routes on account of inhospitable areas and robbers. Their travel accounts nevertheless amply bear out north India maintained linkages with the Deccan through two corridors: one through eastern Madhya Pradesh and Orissa and the other through the Malwa region. The famous Dakshinapatha (Deccan) invasion of Samudragupta (c. 335-75) seems to have penetrated the eastern Deccan through the first route; it was through eastern and western Malwa that his son and successor Chandragupta II reached Gujarat to defeat the Saka rulers of western India in late fourth and early fifth centuries AD. King Chandra of the Mehrauli iron pillar inscription (palaeographically assignable to the Gupta times) is credited with reaching Bahlika (Balkh, present Mazar-i-Shariff, Afghanistan) by crossing the seven mouths of the river Indus. This may suggest linkages between the Indus delta and northeastern Afghanistan. Overland routes passing through the northwestern regions were particularly important for the supply of quality war-horses from Kamboja. Yavanas or merchants of West Asiatic origin, according to Kalidasa, brought fine horses through this route to north Indian plains (*asvavanikena yavanena*).

### 14.3.5 Long Distance Maritime Trade

Our information on long-distance maritime trade during the period under review is relatively less than that available for the previous centuries which witnessed vibrant commercial contacts between India and the Roman Empire, especially through the Red Sea network. One notes a gradual decline of trade with the Roman Empire and the western sector of the Indian Ocean at the turn of the fourth century AD. However,

coins of Byzantine emperors have been found from coin hoards from south India. Ports of Gujarat seem to have been important for trade in the Persian Gulf which provided the major communication with Iran under the Sassanid rulers. This will be evident from the late sixth century descriptions of the port of Barygaza in the Christian Topography by Cosmas Indicopleustes. The distribution of Red Ware from coastal Gujarat to the Kirman coast of south-western Iran strongly suggests maritime contacts of the north-western littorals with the Iranian sea-board. Overseas activities are more frequent in the Bay of Bengal which facilitated commercial and cultural contacts with South-east Asia. The Bengal delta played an important role as an outlet to the sea for the land-locked Ganga plains. In AD 414 Fa-hsien boarded from the famous port of Tamralipta a commercial vessel bound for Sri Lanka. The description of this voyage clearly shows that it was a high sea-voyage, distinct from a coastal journey, facilitated by the north-east monsoon wind system. From Sri Lanka the Chinese pilgrim proceeded to Java in south-east Asia and finally reached the Chinese coast. The seaborne contacts of the Bengal coast is best illustrated by the presence of a *mahanavika* (a master mariner), named Buddhagupta in Malay peninsula. This sixth century inscription from Malay peninsula mentions Buddhagupta as a resident of Raktamrittika (*Raktamrittikavasika*), usually located in the Murshidabad district, West Bengal. The Bengal delta with numerous rivers including the Ganga was particularly suitable for reaching the Bay of Bengal. That is why in two sixth century inscriptions from Bangladesh mention is made of a ship-building area (*navataksheni*) and of an officer looking after trade (*vyaparakarandya*). An area in central deltaic Bengal was named *Navyavakasika* (new channel or opening) which was associated with *praksamudra*. The term *praksamudra* either implies that the administrative area of *Navyavakasika* reached upto the sea or the eastern (*prak*) sea (*samudra*) was accessible from the deltaic zone through a new fluvial channel. The premier port in this area was undoubtedly Tamralipta, figuring prominently in Hsuan Tsang's travel account in Bengal. Hsuan Tsang also indicates the importance of San-mo-ta-ta or Samatata which maintained overseas contacts with six areas in mainland South-east Asia.

### 14.3.6 Coinage

A significant index of trade in north India during the three centuries comes from coins. The Imperial Guptas are celebrated in Indian history for minting excellent gold coinage for nearly two centuries. Superbly executed, the Gupta gold coins were known initially as dinaras and later as *suvarnas* in contemporary inscriptions. They were struck on a standard unit of weight (metrology) of 124 grains; in other words, the Guptas probably continued the metrology of the Kushana gold coins. It was during the reign of Kumaragupta (AD 414-54) that the first attempts at striking the Gupta gold coins on a heavier metallic standard was made. Some of the gold coins of Kumaragupta weighed 132 grains. The heavier *suvarna* weight standard of 144 grains for the Gupta gold coins was introduced during the reign of Skandagupta (AD 455-67). Though the Gupta gold coins begun to be struck on a heavier weight standard, the metallic purity of gold coins was far from being maintained, especially after AD 500. In fact, there is a distinct possibility that the *suvarna* standard gold coins of the later rulers of the imperial Gupta family had a debased gold content. This strongly suggests a period of economic difficulties within the empire. Long-distance trade could have been disturbed by the Huna inroads in north India during the reign of Skandagupta (c. AD 455-467) and also during the first quarter of the sixth century AD. Many rulers formerly vassals of the Guptas began to issue coins as marks of their overthrowing allegiance to the Guptas. They often imitated the weight standard and devices of the Gupta gold coinage; but these gold coins were

mostly debased gold currency, sometimes having as low as 37% gold contents. It is unlikely that these gold coins of *suvarna* weight standard (144 grains) had adequate intrinsic value and were hardly suitable for long-distance trade during the second half of the sixth century AD.

The silver coinage of the Guptas began with the conquest of Gujarat region from the Western Kshatrapa rulers in the early part of the fifth century AD. The Gupta silver coinage followed the weight standard of Kshatrapa silver coinage and was not based on the long-standing indigenous *karshapana* (silver coin) standard of 32 *ratis* or 57.6 grains. A copper plate of the fifth century from north Bengal clearly shows that the Gupta silver coin was known as *rupaka*. The ratio between the Gupta gold and silver coins was 1:16. These coinages in precious metals speak highly of the trade, including long-distance trade in north India, at least till AD 500 after which a slump in the long-distance overland trade in north India cannot entirely be ruled out.

### 14.3.7 Urban Centres

Urban centres as politico-administrative centres, trade centres and cultural centres figure in the literary texts of the period, especially in the celebrated works of Kalidasa. Sanskrit texts and inscriptions are replete with references to *puras* and *nagaras*. The famous lexicon, *Amarakosa*, cites the terms *pura*, *nagara* and *putabhedana* as interchangeable terms to denote urban centres. The term *putabhedana*, it has already been stated, means a type of trade centre. Its inclusion in terms to denote cities suggests that at least some major centres of trade assumed urban proportion. Another well known technical treatise, the *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana has the city-bred man (*nagaraka*) at the centre of its focus. Images of vibrant city life are also available in four *bhanas* or monologue plays of the Gupta period. On the other hand, Fa-hsien and Hsuan Tsang give the impression that several famous and older cities of north India lost their erstwhile prosperity and glory and were experiencing decay. To this has been added the field archaeological information about urban centres of north India many of which showed signs of impoverishment. Cities like Sravasti, Mathura, Atranjikheda, Khairadih (in Uttar Pradesh), Rajagriha, Vaisali (in Bihar), and Champa were past their heydays. It is true that cities like Varanasi and Ujjaiyini continued to be important urban centres. There is also no major sign of decline in the urban standard at Mahasthangarh and Bangarh in north Bengal. But in general the archaeological material of the Gupta phase (AD 300-600) are not as rich as the Saka-Kushana-Satavahana phase (c. 200BC-AD 300) in terms of urban artefacts. A number of scholars have attributed the decline of urban centres in the Gupta period to the decrease in India's long-distance trade with the Roman Empire and to the adverse effects of the Huna raids on overland trade routes in north India. This perception of languishing trade and decaying urban centres during the Gupta and post-Gupta times has generated considerable scholarly controversy. The problem will be elaborately discussed in a subsequent section. (For details see our Course EHI-03, Block-1, Unit-2)

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## 14.4 TRADE, MARKET PLACES AND URBAN CENTRES AD 650-1300

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Studies of these six centuries and a half have in recent years generated significant debates among historians. The period in question began to attract the attention of historians since the mid-thirties of the twentieth century, though initially scholars showed a distinct preference for dynastic history. Politically, north India and the

whole of the subcontinent abounded in monarchical powers. But unlike the powers of the pre-600 AD none of the powers exercised paramount position over either north India, the Deccan and the far south. The political scene is featured by the prevalence of a number of regional powers of great strength and many local powers. Another notable character of the politico-administrative set up is the presence of numerous feudatories or *samantas* of various grades and ranking. The political scenario is much more complex than the previous centuries. In recent times scholars are more interested in explaining the processes of the emergence and consolidation of regional polities rather than presenting the narratives of dynastic successions. All these rulers issued numerous land grants which provide the main source of information not only for the political life but also for social, economic and cultural history.

#### 14.4.1 Debates on Urban Decay-Arguments for Decline

As we have pointed out earlier, the land grants understandably contain extremely valuable data on early medieval rural society and economy. But the very nature and purpose of these grants leave little scope of recording activities of craftsmen and merchants in urban centres. One can hardly miss the immense proliferation of copper plate charters since AD 600 in the whole of the subcontinent, including north India. Information on the non-agrarian sector of the economy in such grants is relatively scarce. This is in sharp contrast to the donative records and administrative documents prior to AD 600 where merchants, craftsmen, various professional groups were prominently mentioned often in the context of the non-rural settlements. A number of scholars have argued that the change in the mode of documents and documentation is in fact an indicator of the changes in social and economic life. The huge number of land grants, according to them, implies a strong ruralisation of the economy after AD 600/650. In such changing material milieu the relevance of craftsmen, merchants and urban centres appear to have lessened. It has been argued that the decline in India's flourishing and brisk commerce with the Roman empire after the fourth century adversely affected India's commercial economy. The period from AD 600-1000 did not witness India's meaningful participation in long-distance trade, and as a result there was little urge to commodity crafts production and their exchange in an international network. It is implied therefore that India's long distance trade revived after AD 1000 mainly because of the growth in the trade with the expanding Arab commercial network. To the data from epigraphic materials has been added and supplemented information from literary texts, especially the *Puranas*. A close perusal of the major *Puranas*, which appear to have taken their present shape by around 4th/5th century AD, has led many scholars to conclude that the *Puranic* descriptions imply sharp changes in social, economic and political situations. These scholars perceive major crises in the socio-economic and political set up after fifth century. Attention has been drawn to *Puranic* descriptions of the impoverished conditions of merchants in the *Kaliyuga*, the worst of the ages in the traditional scheme of four ages in Indian thought. The merchants, according to the *Brihannaradiya Purana*, would be reduced to the position of servants (*karmopajivin*) and rice-husker (*tandulakar*) in the Kali age. Only a handful number of merchants are explicitly stated in inscriptions in north India during the period from AD 600 to AD 1000. Tamralipta, the premier port not only of Bengal, but also of the entire land-locked Ganga valley, died down in eighth century, mainly on account of the siltation of the river on which it stood. The last known epigraphic reference to Tamralipta is found in an eighth century inscription from the Hazaribagh region in Bihar. The port of Barbaricum in the delta of the river Indus did not enjoy any economic prominence in the early medieval times. The port of Daibul in the same region began to come to limelight as an international port after tenth century. Similarly, the premier port in the Gujarat, namely Barygaza or Broach, had been past its former glory.

The fading out of these three ports could have adversely affected the long-distance maritime trade of north India. All these have been taken to demonstrate the gradual decline of trade and merchants in the economic life of early medieval north India.

The above portrayal of dwindling trade in the early middle ages has been further driven home by the paucity of coins of precious metals. Three outstanding regional powers of early medieval times, namely the Palas and the Senas of Bengal and Bihar (c. AD 750-1200) and the Rashtrakutas of the Deccan (c. AD 754-974) did not issue any coins. Another major power, the Gurjara-Pratiharas of Kanauj and western India, struck silver coins but of doubtful weight standard and metallic purity. Such coins would have been unsuitable as reliable metallic medium of exchange in long-distance trade because of their questionable intrinsic value which did not match their face value. A notable exception to this declining monetary situation is seen in the issue of quality coins by the Shahi rulers of the Punjab and northwestern India. It has been pointed out that the territory under the Shahi rulers of northwestern India had not yielded any copper plate. Thus some scholars would like to underline that money economy and landgrant economy were mutually incompatible.

In many copper plate grants from the Ganga valley and especially from Bengal, coin terms like *purana*, *dharana*, and *dramma* occasionally occur. Though these coin terms were known, no actual specimen of such coin has been discovered from the realms of the Palas and the Senas. On the other hand large number of copper plates often mention *kapardakas* or *cowries*. The expression *kapardaka-purana* also figures in these copper plates. The latter term does not point to a particular type of coin, but refers to a *purana* or a silver coin in terms of its equivalence to *cowry*-shells. The traditional arithmetical tables of early medieval eastern India indicates that the ratio between a silver coin and *xt:cowry*-shells stood at 1:1280. In other words 1280 cowries were equivalent to one silver coin. The wide use of the expression *kapardaka-purana* in early medieval inscriptions, hitherto unknown before eighth century, may suggest that *cowry*-shells were the principal medium of exchange. These seem to have replaced the metallic medium of exchange which lost their relevance on account of their questionable intrinsic value. Excavations at Colgong near Bhagalpur in eastern Bihar have yielded large number of *cowries*, thereby providing the material proof of their regular circulation as a medium of exchange. It has been pointed out that *cowries* could have been only a poor and inadequate substitute for metallic money. The transportation of the huge bulk of *cowry*-shells would have created more problems than advantages; in other words, *cowry*-shells are viewed as unsuitable for long-distance commerce. These could be at the best useful for local level trade and were 'restrictive of long-distance trade'. Thus the widespread prevalence of *cowry*-shells as notional currency is interpreted as a further evidence of the decline of long-distance trade. The perception of a 'monetary anaemia' afflicting the erstwhile vibrant commercial economy is strongly present in many historical researches.

Dwindling trade and relative absence of metallic money were not conducive to the large scale production of commodities for exchange related purposes. The result was not only immense dependence on agriculture, but also of a self-sufficient village economy. All the needs of the villages are suggested to have been produced and available in villages which felt little urge for movements of commodities from outside. The relative lack of trade thus brought about self-sufficient villages which were enclosed and stagnant. The lack of coined money could have posed serious problems for rulers to pay salaries to their officers. Under such circumstances, the ruler had to take recourse to assigning land to his officers in lieu of cash. This would give rise to the practice of issuing secular land grants, in addition to grants of lands for religious persons and institutions. The assignment

of service or secular land grants further impoverished the royal exchequer and corroded the central authority. In the absence of trade and paucity of metallic medium of exchange there emerged in early medieval north India an essentially self-sufficient and enclosed village economy. The adverse effects of languishing commerce and 'monetary anaemia' were not thus limited to economic life, but paved the way for a decentralised polity and parcellised sovereignty. It is viewed by proponents of Indian feudalism that languishing commerce resulted in an acute shortage of metallic currency. This ushered in great difficulties of payment of royal functionaries in cash; the outcome of this situation was the practice of giving service-grants (like subsequent *jagir*) to high officers in lieu of cash. In course of time these powerful functionaries not only amassed enormous wealth from the areas assigned to them, but became locally very powerful. This would further undermine the authority of the ruler, the apex political authority. In other words, the ruler gradually suffered considerable loss of his economic and political prerogatives at the cost of these feudatories and vassals. The conditions in economy and polity resulted in the genesis and consolidation of feudalism in India in early medieval period.

As the economy, characterised as feudal, was steeped in ruralism and gave little scope of trade, it is supposed to have been hardly conducive to urban growth. In stark contrast to the wealth of archaeological data on urban centres of early historical period, excavated and explored information about early medieval cities is much poorer. Many of the former urban centres have yielded evidence of their decaying material milieu, haphazard layout and utilization of re-used bricks. These are interpreted as clear signs of deurbanisation over greater parts of the subcontinent, including north India, during AD 600-1000 phase. A Prakrit text mentions that urban centres turned into villages (*nayarani gamabhuayani hohinti*). It has been argued that decline in India's commerce played a crucial role in the urban decay. Urban areas, belonging to the non-agrarian sector of the economy, were linked up with trade centres, and many of urban centres were also major centres of trade and commerce. Analyses of the copper plates of the Palas, Senas and the Pratiharas may indicate lesser references to terms like *nagara* and *pura*. Copper plates are replete with references to *jayaskandhavaras* or victorious army camps. Such *jayaskandhavaras* began to act as politico-military headquarters. It has been inferred that urban centres as areas for exchange and crafts production gradually faded away and were replaced by military and political headquarters. Early medieval north India witnessed the rise of many centres of pilgrimage (*tirtha*) which as sacred centres sometime assumed urban proportions. The historians of Indian feudalism argue that as urban centres lost their primary relevance as trading zones, they became religious centres which would undermine their role as centres of production/manufacture of commodities and exchange. Thus there prevailed, like the monetary anaemia', an urban anaemia in early medieval times. Urban contraction resulted in rural expansion which strengthened the material milieu of the feudal economy of early medieval India. Trade, or more precisely the assumed absence of trade, plays a crucial role in the feudal social formation in early medieval north India. Three areas showed typical symptoms of a feudal economy: Bengal under the Palas and the Senas, the Gurjara-Pratihara kingdom in the the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*, and the Rashtrakuta domain in the Deccan.

#### **14.4.2 Debates on Urban Decay-Arguments Against**

The above portrayal of a declining commercial and urban economy in north India during the early middle ages, however, has not gone uncontested. The formulation of the feudal economy in early medieval India has also been critiqued. Many scholars have pointed out factual inaccuracies in the formulation of the feudal economy. Attempts have been made by using various sources, including epigraphic materials, to show that trade did not

alarmingly decline and that there was no major de-urbanisation over an extensive area. It is beyond any doubt that the practice of land grants, often issued with reference to lands lying in the uncultivated, unsettled forest or fallow tracts, paved the way for unprecedented rural expansion. But does the proliferation of agrarian settlements necessarily imply consolidation of self-sufficient and enclosed villages? Two essential and indispensable requirements of human life, namely salt and iron, were not available locally at each and every village. If these items were to be procured from non-local sources, then serious doubts can be raised about the perception of self-sufficiency and the enclosed nature of early medieval villages.

### Presence of Market Places

In-depth studies of land grants reveal that market places were not entirely absent in these records, even in inscriptions of pre-1000 AD days. Inscriptions and textual sources speak of the presence of various types of market places, some of them hitherto unknown prior to AD 600. Thus the term *hatta* or *hattika* frequently occurs in the inscriptions of north India in the early middle ages. *Hatta/hattika* generally signifies a rural level small centre of exchange. The term survives in the modern word *hat*, widely known in Bengal and Bihar. Such rural market centres are periodic in nature in that transactions do not take place there everyday, but only once or twice per week on fixed days. In copper plates which are strongly oriented to the rural surroundings, village level market places like the *hatta* and the *hattika* figure frequently. They are also mentioned in the copper plates as important landmarks in the rural areas. Many such epigraphic descriptions of the *hatta* also speak of the availability of the drinking-water (*prapa*) and resting places (*arama*), feeding houses (*sattra*) close to the *hatta*. In some inscriptions of the Palas, the terms *hattavara* is encountered. It would probably denote a *hatta* more important or larger than an ordinary one. A case in point is probably Devapaladevahatta. It stood close to the famous monastery and university of Nalanda. The *hatta* being named after Devapala (c. AD 810-850), the famous Pala ruler, it is likely that it was larger and more prominent than a simple rural level market place. That there stood a *hatta* in the eastern part (*purvahatta*) of the well known urban market centre at Tattanandapura (Ahar, Bulandshahr district, Uttar Pradesh) is evidently clear from the inscriptions found from there (second half of the ninth century). This *hatta* was certainly not a rural level market centre, but was situated within a large urban trading area. The mention of a *hattamarga* or a street leading to a market place is found in another inscription from Tattanandapura. Thus the term *hatta* could mean a trade centre in an urban area, in addition to its more common connotation of a rural exchange centre. A similar *hatta* was established at the formerly deserted site of Rohinisakupaka in AD 861 by Kakkuka in Jodhpur area of Rajasthan; at this market centre were also settled merchants (*hatta mahajanscha sthapita*).

At early medieval Prthudaka (modern Pehoa, Karnal district, Haryana) took place in the ninth century a horse-fair (*ghotaka-yatra*). The relevant inscription also gives us names of horse-dealers who assembled at Prthudaka. The term *yatra* here stands for a fair which is once again periodic in nature. It is hardly expected that animal fairs would be conducted daily throughout the year. On the other hand it is logical to infer that such a fair would be organised at a fixed time in the year, particularly during some festive seasons. Though periodic in nature, a *yatra* is different from a *hatta* as transactions in the former would not take place once or twice a week, but only once a year. Such an annual fair for the transactions in woolly (?) animals took place in the ninth century Kaman in Rajasthan. The Kaman inscription calls it as *kambali-hatta*.

**Details On Horse Fair- Pehwa Inscription**

Om! During the increasing, auspicious and victorious reign of the feet of his majesty, the supreme sovereign, superior king of great kings (*and*) supreme lord, the illustrious Bhoja who mediates on the feet of his majesty, the supreme sovereign, superior king of great kings (*and*) supreme lord, the illustrious Ramabhadra, in the year two hundred exceeded by seventy-six, on the seventh (*lunar day*) of the bright half of the month of Vaisakha, (*in figures*) Samvat 276 Vaisakha sudi 7 – on this lunar day specified as above by the year, month and (*civil*) day (*mentioned*) met here in the famous town of Prithudaka at the horse-fair on the *Pisachichaturdasi* the (*following*) inhabitants of Chutavarshika, Bhatta Viruka's sons Vanda and Rajyavala and Valluka, likewise Ranuka's son Rajyasiha; the (*following*) inhabitants of Utpalika, Bhalluka's son Mangaka, Chinha's son Chonaraka; likewise the (*following*) inhabitants of Chikkariselavanapura, Dada's son Kalluka, his son Jayaraka, Vishnu's son Adityaraka, Rajjuka's sons Chinha and Rangaka, Kalluka's son Vamuka; the (*following*) inhabitants of Valadevapura (Baladevapura), Khambhata's son Hoddha, Mriganka's son Viddaka, Kesava's son Dhanuka, Khangaka's son Vamuka, Manikka's son Uehari; the (*following*) inhabitants of Sarankadika, Nara's sons Lohata (or Lahata) and Sankara, Valuka's son Isvaraditya; the (*following*) inhabitants of Siharudukkaka, Ullaka's son Vachchhaka, Jayadharaka's son Ranika, Sura's son Pragada; the (*following*) inhabitants of Traighataka, Dharata's son Chanda, Ekagoraka's son Savva, Devasarman's son Phampha, Vagguka's son Kammika; the (*following*) inhabitants of Ghamghaka, Lallika's son Svamiraka, Simghuka's son Si[ha], Damodara's son Pombha, Halluka's son Davvu,... Kasili, Mana's son Khajji; the (*following*) inhabitant of Asvala-Uhovaka, Usuha's son Vaddha. The foreman of the ...dealers, come from various countries, chief among whom are those mentioned above, grants to the sacred place of famous Prithudaka a charter to the following (*effect*): To the (*temple of the*) god built by the illustrious Guhaditya in famous Kanyakubja, and to (*the temple of*) the god built by Kadambaditya even there in the Gotirtha, and to the (*temple of the*) god riding on Garuda built by Bhuvaka, the son of the Nagara Bhatta Prabhakara on the bank of the Ganges in famous Bhojapura near famous Kanyakubja, and to the (*temple of the*) sacrificial boar built by the same Bhuvaka in famous Prithudaka near the Eastern Sarasvati, we have given on the sale of horses, mares, mules and other animals – in Prithudaka in the case of a purchase by the king as well as in the case of a purchase by the Thakuras, the provincials and so forth, and in Traighataka and other sacred places in the case of a purchase by the king alone – for the sake of spiritual merit two *dharmas* for each animal, as a perpetual endowment; and dividing that into twenty-four shares, we have assigned seven shares to the (*temple of the*) god built by the illustrious Guhaditya, and seven shares to the (*temple of the*) god built by Kadambaditya, and seven shares to (*the temple of*) him who rides on Garuda, and one share to the (*temple of the*) sacrificial boar built by Bhuvaka in Prithudaka, and one share to the temple priest of the latter, and one share to the sacred place of Prithudaka; moreover we have assigned out of the twelve shares into which the one *dharma* given for each horse by the purchasers of horses has been divided, [*six*] shares to (*the temple of*) the sacrificial boar built by Bhuvaka in Prithudaka near the Eastern Sarasvati and to the temple priest of the latter two shares, and to the sacred place in famous Prithudaka four shares. This [*should be agreed to*] by the sellers and buyers of horses, (*and*) the virtuous *Goshthikas* should thus manage on their own part and on behalf of others, according to the rule laid down above, as long as sun and moon exist. Moreover these shares should be divided [*by the Goshthikas*] according to [*the rule*] laid down above.

**G. Buhler, "The Peheva Inscription from the Temple of Garibnath", *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. I, pp. 188-190.**

It is almost entirely from north Indian inscriptions that one comes across a new type of market place from the eighth-ninth centuries. This is *mandapika*, literally meaning a covered area. The term in question can easily be equated with *mandis* which abounds in modern times in the Ganga-Yamuna doab, upper Ganga valley and western India. These *mandis* are larger than rural level *hats*, but smaller than markets in large urban areas. One of the earliest references to a *mandi* is seen in the Baijnath *Prasasti* (8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century) in the Kangra region in Himachal Pradesh. At Kiragrama (modern Kangra) there was a *mandapika* where three merchants belonging to a family of merchants donated a cash

of 6 *drammas* (silver coins) out of the daily collection at the *mandapika* in favour of a temple at Baijnath. At Siyadoni (modern Siron) stood another large *mandapika* where the presence of merchants (including salt dealers) and various professional groups is unmistakable from the inscriptions. Inscriptions also suggest that there was a marked concentration of *mandapikas* in Rajasthan and Gujarat from the middle of the tenth century onwards, and especially after AD 1000. The *mandapika* at Naddula (modern Nadole) demands our special attention. Inscriptions from Nadol show that Naddula was initially a village, in fact one village in a cluster of twelve villages (*dvadasagramiya Naddulagrama*). Naddula subsequently emerged as a *mandapika* where considerable trade took place mainly in grains and other agricultural products. Naddula then began to be called a *nagara* or city and ultimately became the political centre of the Chahamanas of Nadole. It appears that Naddula was located almost at the centre of the cluster of twelve villages or was more or less equidistant from those villages. This immensely helped Naddula function as a nodal point where surplus agricultural products from surrounding villages were brought. This paved the way for the establishment of a *mandapika* at Naddula. These factors were instrumental in the remarkable transformation of Naddula from a village to an urban centre and finally to an apex political centre of local power in early medieval Rajasthan. That these *mandapikas* were well connected by trade routes and available transport systems is demonstrated by epigraphic records. Thus in AD 1114 commodities were brought to the *mandapika* at Mangalapura (mod. Mangrol, Gujarat) by oxen (*vrsa*), asses (*gardabha*), and camels (*ushtra*). *Mandapikas* were appearing also in the Kalachuri kingdom in Dabhala (eastern part of Madhya Pradesh). Such a *mandapika* was situated at Bilhari and another at Karitalai. The *mandapika* at Bilhari is mentioned in an inscription of AD 975. The commercial character of the *mandapika* is clearly driven home by the references to merchants assembling there. Many *mandapikas* were known as *sulkamandapikas*, i.e. tolls and customs were levied both in cash and kind at the *mandapika*. The levy of tolls is a clear proof of the commercial transactions at the *mandapika*. The *mandapika* at Nadole was designated as *Srinaddula talapada sulkamandapika*. The *mandapika* in question was officially recognised as a toll-taking centre; moreover its location in *talapada* area (lands fully assessed for revenue) further underlines the strong possibilities of revenue-bearing aspects of the *mandapika*. No less significant is the impressive range of commodities which were brought to the *mandapika* for sale. Large varieties of agrarian products, including grains and green vegetables, salt, regularly appear among the list of items brought to the *mandapika*. Textiles and various types of spices are also mentioned in the list of leviable products. Interestingly enough, pepper (*marica*) was available at the *mandapika* at Bilhari in Madhya Pradesh; pepper is unlikely to have been a local product of this region. It was probably brought from far away Malabar, the area best known for pepper plantation. At Bilhari and also at the *mandapikas* of Sripatha and Vusavata (in Bayana, Rajasthan, AD 955) were sold much costlier items like the horse. The elephant, another precious animal meant for an elite clientele, figures in the list of dutiable items at the *mandapika* at Bilhari. The *mandapikas* thus witnessed transactions in grains, many daily necessity commodities (probably as bulk items), and costlier items like spices and animals like horses and elephants. Some of the *mandapikas*, for instance those at Siyadoni and Bilhari, were designated as *pattanamandapika*. The term may suggest either a *mandapika* in an urban area or a *mandapika* which had assumed an urban proportion. The *Lekhapaddhati*, an early medieval text from Gujarat, uses the term *mahamandapika*. The use of the prefix *maha* clearly demonstrates that at least some *mandapikas* became much larger than their counterparts. These *mandapikas* seem to have maintained crucial trading linkages both with their respective rural hinterland and also with larger urban areas.

Inscription At Siyadoni

1. [Lines 1-4]: Samvat 960, Sravana (*in words and figures*). The whole town gave a field measuring 200 by 225 *hastas* to Sri-Narayana-bhattacharaka, set up by the merchant Chanduka, the son of Sangata, in the southern part of the town.
2. [4-7]: Samvat 964, Margasira va.di. 3 (*in words and figures*). The *Mahasamantadhipati* Undabhata assigned an endowment, securing the daily payment of a quarter of a *panchiyakadramma* and of one *yuga* (?) Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka, set up by Chanduka.
3. [7-8]: The same date. The merchants Chanduka, Savasa, and Mahapa, sons of Sangata, gave an *avasika* (or residence) comprising four houses to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka, set up by Chanduka, the son of Sangata.
4. [8-10]: Samvat 965, Asvina su.di. 1 (*in words and figures*). The merchant Nagka, son of Chandu, made an endowment acquired of certain potters, to the effect that the distillers of spirituous liquor, on every cask of liquor, were to give liquor worth half a *vigrahapaladramma* (?) to the god (Vishnu).
5. [10]: The merchant Nagaka, son of Chandu, assigned (an endowment securing) the daily payment by certain sugar-boilers of a *varahakayavimsopaka* (?).
6. [11-13]: Samvat 967, Phalgunava.di. 15 (*in words and figures*). The merchant Vasudeva gave (an *avasika* ?) in the Dosihatta to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka, set up by Vasudeva near (?) the Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka set up by Chanduka; and a house of his own, to the (same) god, (for the worship of the sacred fire).
7. [13-15]: The merchant Chanduka gave a *vithi* (or shop) in the Prasannahatta; and the same Chanduka, son of Sangata, gave four hereditary *vithis* of his own to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka.
8. [15-16]: The seller of betel Kesava, son of Vatesvara, gave a hereditary *vithi* of his own in the Chaturhatta to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka, set up by Chandu.
9. [16-17]: The merchant Nagaka, son of Chandu, gave two *vithis*, acquired in the Dosihatta, to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka.
10. [17-18]: The merchant Siluka, son of Mahapa, gave a *vithi* acquired by him to Sri-Narayana-bhattacharaka.
11. [18-20]: Samvat 969, Magha su.di. 5 (*in words and figures*). The merchant Nagaka, son of Chandu, gave a capital of 1,350 *srimadadivarahadrammas*, invested with the distillers of spirituous liquor, who were to pay every month half a *vigrahatungiyadramma* on every cask of liquor (?) to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka.
12. [20-21]: The merchant Nagaka, son of Chandu, gave an endowment realizing a payment of two *kapardakas* on certain *yugas* in the Dosihatta(?).
13. [21-22]: Nagaka gave a *vithi* acquired in the Dosihatta to Sri-Narayana-bhattacharaka.
14. [22-23]: Nagaka, son of Chandu, gave three *vithis* of his own to Sri-Narayana-bhattacharaka.
15. [23-24]: The merchant Bhaila, son of Govinda, gave a hereditary *vithi* (realizing one-third of a *vigrahapaliyadramma*?) to Sri-Vamanasvamideva.
16. [24-25]: Nagaka gave two houses to Tribhuvanasvamideva.
17. [25-26]: The seller of betel Dhamaka gave an *uvataka* bought by him to Sri-Umamahesvara.
18. [26-27]: Samvat 994, Vaisakha va.di. 5 samkrantau. The sellers of betel, Savara, son of Kesava, and Madhava, son of Ichchu, gave an endowment realizing the payment of a *vigrahadrammavisovaka* on every *palika* of leaves to the god (Vishnu), set up by Chanduka.
19. [27]: Savasa gave a *vithi* to Tribhuvanasvamideva.
20. [27-28]: Nagaka gave a *palika* of oil from every oil-mill of the oil-makers (?).
21. [28-29]: Samvat 1005, Magha su.di. 5 (*in words and figures*). The Mahajans in the Dosihatta assigned a monthly payment of one-third of a *dramma* to Sri-Bhailasvamideva, set up by the merchant Vikrama.
22. [29-30]: The Sutradhara Jejapa, Visiaka, Bhaluaka, and other stone-cutters, assigned a payment of one-third of a *vigrahapaladramma* on every *bharana* to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka.
23. [30-31]: Samvat 1008, Magha su.di. 11 (*in figures only*). Kesava, Durgaditya, and other oil-makers, gave a *palika* of oil from every oil-mill to Sri-Chakrasvamideva, set up by Purandara in the temple of Vishnu erected by Chandu.
24. [31-33]: The merchants Mahaditya and Nohala, sons of Pappa, gave an *avasika*, comprising three houses, to Sri-Chakrasvamideva, set up by Pappaka, the son of Dedada.
25. [33-34]: Samvat 991, Magha su.di. 10 (*in figures*). Nagaka, son of Chandu, Dedaika, Vali, and Rudaka, sons of Jaju, and Chhitaraka, son of Sava, gave an *avasika* with the houses and *vithis* belonging to it to the god (Vishnu).
26. [34-36]: Dedaika, Valika and Rudaka, sons of Jaju, gave a *vithi* in the Chatushkahatta to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka, set up by Chandu.
27. [36-39]: Samvat 1025, Magha va.di. 9 (*in figures*). The merchant Sridhara, son of Mahaditya, assigned a quarter of a *srimadadivarahadramma*, paid as the rent of a *vithi* (?) to Sri-Vishnu-bhattacharaka, set up by Mahaditya in the temple of Vishnu erected by Chandu.

**K. Kielhorn, 'Siyadoni Stone Inscription', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. I, pp. 167-68.**

Market places evidently had shops which were known as *vithis* and *apanas*. At Siyadoni some shops were described as hereditarily owned by some merchants (*pitripitamahoparjita*), some others were owned or built by merchants themselves (*svoparjita*). The mention of shops owned hereditarily by traders-possibly for three generations-will suggest the brisk commercial activities in such shopping establishments over a long period. These shops were evidently meant for retail trade.

Though *hatta/hattika* and *pura, nagara* figure in copper plates of the Pala-Sena period (c. AD 750-1200), *mandapikas* are absent in Bengal. Bengal, located in the Ganga delta and watered by many rivers, had several riverine ports facilitating inland riverine communications. Early medieval copper plates from Bengal often mention small boat stations (*nau-danda, nau-bandha*) as landmarks in rural spaces which have innumerable streams and rivulets (*srotasvini, ganginika*), canals, and channels. Of course the most important riverine route was along the Ganga or Bhagirathi on which plied many vessels (*sa khalu Bhagirathipathapravartmana-nauvata*). From the late seventh century onwards, the eastern part of the delta began to have riverine ports. One such port was Devaparvata (modern Mainamati-Lalmai, Bangladesh) which according to copper plates (from seventh to early tenth century) by the river Kshiroda on which plied many boats around the river-port of Devaparvata. Another copper plate of c. AD 971, found from Sabhar (close to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh) records an unusual place-name: Vangasagara-sambhandariyaka. Sabhar is located on the river Vamsi and functions as a small inland riverine port. The term *sambhandariyaka* may be taken to mean a place offering adequate or proper facilities (*samyak*) for storage of goods (*bhandara*). The very name Sabhar is suggested to have been derived from the word, *sambhara*, meaning a stock of commodities. There is a strong likelihood that at Sabhar or ancient Sambhara stood a *sambhandariyaka*. This warehousing facility at Sabhar may bring it close to *putabhedanas* of earlier times (see above).

Images of mercantile activities figure in various types of literary texts. The *knivalayamala* of *Girasenasuri* (c. 8th century) offers a lively account of an assembly of merchants (*vanikmeli*) who congregated at the well-known port town of Surparaka. Though the account is probably based on earlier memories, the interesting point is the exchange of experiences of merchants among themselves. The same port also appears in the *Jatakamala* of *Aryasura* (c. 7th/8th century). At Surparaka, according to this text, lived the Buddha in one of his previous births as a master mariner, conversant with the art of bringing in (*aharana*) and taking out (*apaharana*) ships. These leave an impression of continuity, and no cessation, of commerce, contrary to the notion that commerce was on the wane in the wake of feudal social formation.

The vast plains of north India were well frequented by several overland routes of communication, some of them gaining particular prominence in the early medieval times. Thus Chia-tan (785-805) informs us about a route which ran from Kamarupa to Magadha by touching Pundravardhana (north Bengal) and Kajanigla (near the Rajmahal Hills). A number of overland routes connected Kanyakubja with different parts of India, as Albiruni reported. One such route ran from Kanyakubja to Gangasagara (at the confluence of the Ganga with the sea) through Ayodhya, Varanasi, Pataliputra and Monghyr. Another route starting from Kanyakubja connected Prayaga (Allahabad), then through the Rewa region of Madhya Pradesh reached Orissa and from there extended as far south as Kanchipuram (near Chennai).

The Ganga-Yamuna *doab* was well connected with western India, according to Albiruni. Thus Mathura maintained an overland linkage with Ujjayini and Bayana (Rajasthan) and from both the places it was possible to reach the well known port of Somnath in Kathiawad.

In the twelfth and early thirteenth century copper plates of some Sena kings one notes a new kind of settlement, named *caturaka*. The term *caturaka* is not encountered in the Bengal inscriptions prior to twelfth century. It means literally a place which stood at the convergence of four roads. The *caturaka* was not a village, but it was also not a large urban market area. One such *caturaka* was known as Betadda-caturaka on the river Ganga (*purve Jahnavisima*). This is identified as Betore in Howrah district, West Bengal which came into considerable prominence in the sixteenth century as an inland riverine port connecting the Ganga with the famous port of Saptagram on the river Sarasvati. The beginning of the role of Betore as a riverine port may thus go back to the twelfth century. These inland port towns in the Ganga delta occupied a position intermediate between the rural hinterland and large urban centres and played a role more or less similar to that of the early medieval *mandapikas* of northern and western India.

The above sources may not speak of a slump in trade in north India. Indirect evidence of commerce can also be gleaned from the list of various revenue-collecting officers available in the copper plates. Thus the references to the *hattapati* (officer in charge of *hattas*), *saulkika* (officer in charge of collection of *sulka* or tolls and customs), *tarik* (officer in charge of collection of *tara* or ferry dues), *gamagamika* (officer looking after ingress and egress), *nauvata* and *arddha-nauvata* (senior and junior officers supervising movements of mercantile fleet) cannot but highlight movements of merchants and commodities in north India. This also implies the existence of some routes of communications, especially the overland communication in north India. In the first half of the ninth century Viradharadeva undertook a journey from Nagarhara (Jelalabad, Afghanistan) to Sambodhi (Bodhgaya, Bihar). The inscription which records this also describes Viradharadeva's delight at the sight of many of his country-men at Bodhgaya. This amply demonstrates the regularity and frequency of travel along this extensive overland communication system. This overland route must have been particularly significant for the import of quality war-horses from the north-western borderland of India into the Ganga valley. It is therefore not surprising that the Pala inscriptions tell us about the eagerness of the Pala kings to procure horses from the northern quarters. This is also corroborated by the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj-us Siraj who impresses upon us the regular arrival of Arab horse dealers in Nudia (the capital of the Sena king, Lakshmanasena, c. AD 1179-1199). Bengal's linkage with the north-eastern frontier areas and Kamarupa in particular are amply borne out by inscriptions, Minhaj's accounts and Marco Polo's travels (c. AD 1254-1324). Gujarat under the Chaulukya rulers experienced considerable improvements in overland connections. Anahilapura, the premier city of the Chaulukya kingdom (Patan), was well connected with Munjapura, Jhunjhuvada, Viramgam, Wadhwan, Sacla, Vanthali. On the other hand it was also linked up with Varanasi, Prayaga and Dhara (in central India). Important ports of Gujarat, like, Stambhapura or Cambay and Somnatha, maintained effective communications with inland towns, especially those in the Malwa plateau. Tamralipta, the premier port in the east till the eighth century, was visited by merchants from Ayodhya. In AD 1024 the Cola king Rajendra's daring raid from coastal Andhra to Vangala-desa in Bengal clearly indicates the overland linkages of Bengal with Orissa and from then onwards to Andhra. In the far north west, Multan in the Punjab rose to considerable prominence as a major centre of trade which was connected with the Ganga plains and also with

the northwestern borderland of the subcontinent. Multan looms large in the Arab accounts as a major trade centre.

### Significant Presence in Maritime Long Distance Trade

The above data and arguments do not suggest a slump in trade in north India during the early middle ages. A careful perusal of available information may not also suggest a languishing trade of north India with areas abroad. For this purpose, the Arabic and Persian texts provide us with significant information. It is surprising that the proponents of Indian feudal formation have generally neglected these sources for the understanding of the long-distance trade of India. The rise and spread of Islam in West Asia, parts of Africa and in the Mediterranean region right up to Spain proved to be conducive to commercial movement. Islam is marked by a distinct orientation to trade and urbanism. The establishment and consolidation of the Abbasid Caliphate in the eighth century facilitated overland communication of West Asia with Central Asia, China and South Asia. But more spectacular developments are noticeable in the maritime commerce. The Abbasid Caliphate was instrumental in increasing the importance of the Persian Gulf (*Darya-i-Akhzar*) with Siraf as the premier port in the northern part of the Gulf. The foundation of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt (Misr) in AD 969 led to another major change in maritime commerce. It resulted in the rise of the Red Sea as the principal sea-lane of western Indian Ocean, facilitating thereby sea-borne trade with India and also the Mediterranean regions. The long-distance maritime trade in the Indian Ocean had its western termini either at Siraf or at Alexandria in Egypt and the eastern termini in maritime South-east Asia and also the coast of China. These maritime movements across the Indian Ocean, guided and shaped by the predictable alterations of the monsoon wind system, had to be involved with India which stood at the centre of the Indian Ocean. The very designation of this maritime space as *al bahr al Hind* (the Sea or Ocean of India) strongly underlines the familiarity of Arabic-speaking merchants and travellers with the Indian ports and harbours. Two segments of the bahr al Hind were well known to the Arab authors: bahr Larvi (Lar=Lata or southern Gujarat; the sea of Gujarat, i.e. the Arabian Sea) and bahr Harkal (the sea of Harikela; Harikela stood for the south-eastern part of Bangladesh; thus bahr Harkal denotes the Bay of Bengal). We may recall that in a copper plate of AD 971 the Bay of Bengal has already been mentioned as Vangasagara. Though ports are numerically more in the Deccan and the far south of India, a number of ports are known in north India too from the Arabic and Persian texts. It is true that these texts speak of greater volume and regularity of trade in the post-1000 AD phase, but there are clear indications of India's maritime trade even before AD 1000.

Accounts of the first Arab invasion of Sind in eighth century in the *Chachnama* and the accounts of an Arabic Historian al Baladhuri (d. c. 892 AD) demonstrate the importance of the port of Daybul, located in the Indus delta. Already by this time, Daybul was noted for its maritime contacts with Sri Lanka. The ruins of this early medieval port have been unearthed at the site of Banbhore in Pakistan. The prominence of Daybul continues in the accounts of Arab writers of the ninth to twelfth centuries. In the western sea-board of northern India it is, however, the Gujarat coast that stole the limelight. Though Broach, called Baruz in the Arab accounts, had faded away, a great port came into the commercial scene, viz. Sristambhapura/Sristambhatirtha or modern Cambay. It figures repeatedly in the Arabic accounts of Sulaiman (c. AD 851), ibn Khurdadbih (c. AD 882), al Masudi (AD 915), Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (AD 955), the anonymous author of the *Hudud al Alam* (AD 982), al

Biruni (AD 1034), al Idrisi (AD 1162), Chau-ju-kua (AD 1225), Marco Polo (AD 1295) and Ibn Battutta (early fourteenth century). It maintained contacts with both Persian Gulf ports like Siraf and Hormuz and Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea. Two early medieval Sanskrit texts, the *Vastupalamahatmyam* and the *Jagaducharita*, speak highly of this port as the centre of activities of two premier Gujarati merchants, Vastupala and Jagadu (twelfth/thirteenth century). Cambay, certainly the outstanding port, was, however, ably supported by several smaller ports which could have acted as feeder ports to the principal port of Cambay. These were Somanatha (figuring prominently in a Sanskrit-Arabic bilingual inscription of AD 1264), al Dyb (Diu, mentioned in a twelfth century Jewish trade letter) and Ghogha. The close contacts between Hormuz (in Sanskrit texts called Ardrapura) and Cambay, Somanatha and Ghogha are well documented in epigraphic and literary sources. Ghogha is specifically mentioned as a point of arrival for ships from Hormuz (*hurmujiwahana*). The port of Cambay was also well linked up with a number of ports in the Konkan coast like, Thana, Sanjan and Chaul all of which are mentioned in the Arabic accounts. These ports in Gujarat and the neighbouring north Konkan coast also appear in Indian textual sources and in inscriptions, generally labelled as *velakulas* or ports.

Attention now may be turned to the ports on the Bengal coast, the major outlet for the land-locked Ganga valley to the sea. It is true that nothing is heard about the active role of the great port of Tamralipta after the eighth century AD. One, however, cannot also miss that as early as in the first half of the seventh century Hsuan Tsang was impressed with the sea-borne connections of Samatata (eastern extreme of the Ganga delta) with certain areas in South-east Asia. This was happening when Tamralipta was at its glorious best. That Samatata-Harikela region was emerging as a major point of contact with maritime South-east Asia in late seventh century will be evident from the accounts of Itsing (AD 675-95 in India). The Arab accounts, from the mid-ninth century to early fourteenth century, speak very highly of a port in the kingdom of DHM (pronounced as Dhaum, i.e. Pala king Dharmapala), thereby locating it in the Bengal delta. This port is Samandar. The name is probably derived from the term *samudra* or sea. Ibn Battutta new it by the name Sudkawan. It was located at the mouth of a river and close to it was an island, which according to al Idrisi (AD 1162) was full of merchants of diverse countries. Idrisi also informs us that the port was located close to a creek or inlet (*khawar*) which facilitated ingress and egress of vessels. Ibn Battutta undertook a journey from Sudkawan far up in the north to Habang which is identified with Habiganj in Bangladesh. He undertook a riverine journey, sailing along the Blue river. This river is generally identified with the Meghna. The various literary accounts about Samandar/Sudkawan have led to its identification with a port located near modern Chittagong (Chattagram). In fact, the area had come to be known as *navachattamandala* in two vase inscriptions, respectively of the eighth and the tenth centuries. The decline and loss of Tamralipta seems to have been considerably compensated with the rise of a new port in the easternmost part of the delta. Samandar, according to the Arabic texts maintained commercial linkages with Serendib (Sri Lanka), Uranshin (Orissa), Ganja (Kanchipuram in Coromandel). Ibn Battutta, though belonging to a later period, speaks of the voyages between Sudkawan and the Maldives. We are not sure about Sudkawan's connections with South-east Asia. But it is well known from a copper plate from Nalanda that the king of Java, Balaputradeva, requested the reigning Pala king, Devapala (AD 802-37) to grant five villages to the Nalanda monastery; the request of the Javanese king was duly honoured. This is clear signal of the regular cultural contacts between Bengal and maritime South-east Asia. Such cultural

contacts appear to have been situated in frequent commercial contacts between the two areas. The significant point is that the Arab authors speak of the availability of fine quality textiles, Qamaruni aloe wood, rhinoceros horns and swords at the port of Samandar which was certainly the point of shipping of these items. Qamaruni aloe wood, standing second only to the aloe wood of Multan, was not a local product of Bengal or Samandar itself. It was brought from Kamarupa along the river to Samandar. The rhinoceros horn too appears to have reached Samandar from north-eastern parts of India. The sword was probably a manufactured item from Anga (eastern Bihar) which was famous for the making of this weapon. Textiles were in all probability local products of Bengal which earned sustained fame for the production of finest quality cotton textiles. The port of Samandar, therefore, commanded an extensive hinterland. As we have earlier pointed out, smaller and inland riverine ports in the Ganga delta (for instance, Devaparvata and Vangasagarasambhandariyaka) are likely to have provided crucial linkages between the premier port in the Bengal delta and the interior. There is little to dispute the brisk long-distance maritime trade in early medieval Bengal. It is difficult to subscribe to the perception of a languishing long-distance trade in early medieval Bengal.

### Existence of Strong Merchant Community

Our sources also underline the diversities of merchants. While older terms like *vanik*, *sarthavaha* and *sresthi* continued, there appeared new types of merchants. A tenth century inscription from western India speaks of *sresthi-sartha*, who was possibly a money merchant as he was found to have minted silver coins. At the famous *mandapika* of Siyadoni we note the active presence of a salt-dealer (*nemakavani*), whose father too was a salt-dealer. He was prosperous enough to have provided considerable patronage to a number of temples in Siyadoni. Though individual merchants do not figure in large numbers in inscriptions of early medieval Bengal, a *vrddhasartha* appears in one donative record of late tenth century. The term *vrddhasartha* may literally denote an old merchant; it may also stand for a senior trader (*cf.* the term *vadduvyavahari* in sooth Indian records). Inscriptions from Gujarat and Rajasthan frequently refer to rich donations by merchants to religious and cultural centers. An insightful probe into early medieval inscriptions from Rajasthan highlights the growing importance of a number of local merchant lineages, e.g. Dhusara, Dharkata, Uesavala/ Oisavala (later day Oswals), Srimali and Pragvata. Merchant-donors often highlighted their genealogy at the time of making donations with a view to underlining that they belonged to a status-group and were not upstarts. A particular type of merchants began to figure in inscriptions from Gujarat after AD 1000. They are called *nauvittakas*, not encountered hitherto before. The term indicates a merchant who derived their wealth (*vitta*) from ships (*nau*); in other words, it denotes a ship-owning merchant. The term has a close correspondence to the Persian/Arabic word, *nakhuda*, i.e. *khuda* or lord of *nau* (ship). The two terms became frequent enough in coastal Gujarat to be abbreviated to *nau* and *nakhu* in inscriptions. Some merchant millionaire of Gujarat, like Vastupala and Jagadu, invested in shipping business, though they were not primarily ship-owners. There is little doubt that the *nauvittakas* and *nakhudas* were very wealthy.

### Significant Flow of Metallic Money

The data and arguments presented above on merchants, market places, commodities, ports and routes of communication do not portray the image of a languishing trade, including long-distance commerce, in early medieval north India. It will be logical here to look into the problem of the relative lack of metallic currency in early medieval

India. The wide prevalence of cowry-shells in eastern India, especially Bengal, does not necessarily indicate that these were indicators of transactions within a restricted commercial circuit. Cowry shells are not locally available in Bengal. Arab accounts of 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the descriptions of Ma huan (early sixteenth century) amply demonstrate that cowry shells reached Bengal from far away Maldives. These were brought in shiploads from the Maldives to Bengal which exported rice to Maldives. Cowry shells cannot be therefore restrictive of long-distance trade, as these were well integrated into the overseas trade in the Indian Ocean. ne: Cowry shells were shipped as bulk items and functioned as small exchange and ballast in the Indian Ocean maritime economy.

While the Palas and the Senas of Bengal are not known to have struck coins, this does not, however, prove the non-minting coins in Bengal. Sustained researches for the last three decades very effectively demonstrate that in the south-easternmost parts of Bengal (the Samatata-Harikela zone) were continuously issued excellent silver coinages from eighth to the thirteenth centuries. This demands a close scrutiny. The last gold coinage of ancient Bengal cannot be pushed beyond late seventh century. These were imitations of Gupta gold coins of *suvarna* standard, but heavily debased. However, from the eighth century onwards began to be struck high quality silver coins, generally weighing 8 grams. The obverse of these pieces has the figure of a recumbent bull and the legend Harikela; the reverse has a tripartite symbol. No name of the issuing political authority is seen on these coins, which carry the name of the region only. We have already pointed out that Harikela denoted the Noakhali-Chittagong area of Bangladesh, to the east of the river Meghna. The importance of Harikela as a zone of commerce has already been underlined. These coins have some affinities to the similar silver pieces issued by the Chandra rulers of contiguous Arakan. Palaeographical analysis of the script of the legend Harikela suggests that these inscribed coins belonged to the eighth century. More or less at the same time also appeared similar silver coins with the legend Pattikera inscribed on the obverse side. Pattikera, like Harikela, refers to a locality, corresponding to Paitkara, Comilla district, Bangladesh. The silver pieces of Pattikera were influenced by the minting tradition of the Harikela silver coinage. Silver coins of high quality (with silver content as high as 90%) continued to be minted in Harikela after the eighth century, but with some significant changes. The later Harikela silver pieces became broader in flan and thinner. Legends and devices appeared only on one side, the reverse was left totally blank. The obverse shows the figure of the recumbent bull, the tripartite symbol and the legend Harikela. The legend Harikela, in the later silver pieces, has been palaeographically assigned to the period from ninth to twelfth/thirteenth centuries. The later Harikela silver pieces were therefore in circulation from the ninth to the twelfth/thirteenth centuries. The most significant change, however, is visible in their metrology. These pieces were struck on two different weight standards. The first weight standard ranged between 2.3800-3.3600 grams; the second type of weight standard ranged from 0.8392 to 1.9912 grams. Both the types were much lighter than the first series of Harikela coins which weighed around 8 grams. The lighter coins corresponded to the well known Indian *karshapana* standard (32 *ratis* or 57.6 grains) of 3.73 grams. These later Harikela silver pieces could very well correspond to the coin-terms like *purana*, *dramma*, *dharana*, repeatedly figuring in the Pala-Sena inscriptions. On the other hand, the later Harikela silver pieces have clear similarity with the reformed Arab *dirham* silver currency of post-tenth century. Excavations from Mainamati (Comilla district, Bangladesh) have yielded a gold coin of the last Abbasid Caliph, al Mustasim al Billah (AD 1247-1258; In 1258). The Harikela coins, being akin to *puranas* of the Pala-Sena records, could

also be easily exchanged with and converted into *cowry* shells. The monetary scenario in south-eastern Bengal fits in well with the information on brisk trade through the port of Samandar. The above statements negate the widely held perception that Bengal had little precious coinage in the early medieval times and therefore experienced a sharp slump in its trade. The above survey also demonstrates that issuance of landgrants and coins were not mutually incompatible in a given area in early medieval India.

It is significant that there are several early medieval coin hoards in northern India, especially in the Ganga-Yamuna doab area, which till early eleventh century was dominated by the Gurjara-Pratiharas. Recent analysis of coin hoards, mostly containing *dramma* pieces, 'demonstrates that the volume of coinage in circulation in North India c. AD 600-1000, was comparable to that of the Kusana, Sultanate and Mughal period, and clearly superior to that of the preceding Gupta and the succeeding Rajput periods'. No shortage of currency in the Gurjara-Pratihara kingdom (late eighth to late tenth century) is visible. Thus neither in eastern India, dominated by the Palas and Senas, nor in the Gurjara-Pratihara realm, there is valid empirical grounds to uphold the conclusion that early medieval north India experienced a 'monetary anaemia' and languishing trade in the early middle ages, especially c. AD 600-1000.

### Growth of Towns

If it is difficult to substantiate any crisis in trade and commerce of the early medieval times and a sharp fall in the number of coins in circulation, it will be relevant to examine whether north India witnessed widespread urban decay. A major impediment to the study of urban centers of the post-Gupta times is the lack of archaeological materials. Little attention has so far been paid to explorations and excavations of early medieval sites, as the principal thrust is on the early historical urban centers. Hsuan Tsang's accounts point to the decaying conditions of cities like Vaisali, Pataliputra, Kusinagara, Sravasti and Kausambi. These cities connected by overland routes in the Himalayan foothills and the Nepalese *terai* probably experienced a decline. But this however does not suggest a general decline of all major urban centers. A few cities of early historical times did continue beyond AD 600, evident from available archaeological materials. Thus Ahichhatra (Bareilly district Uttar Pradesh), originating in the early historical times, offers an unbroken sequence of occupation right into the early medieval phase. No desertion of the site is noticeable at the Purana Qila site in Delhi which continued uninterrupted between the Kushana and the Turkish rule. Archeological remains of the post-Gupta phase are available from Atranjikheda, a leading urban center of early historical times. Similarly the excavations at Rajghat near Varanasi clearly show the continuity of occupation at this urban centre during AD 300-700 and 700-1200 phases. Remains of structures at Ahar have been dated to the period between ninth and twelfth centuries, implying thereby the existence of an urban centre. ed:

The regular mention of *pura*, *pattana* and *nagara* in inscriptions of early medieval times also point to the urban tradition. Some new urban centers also came up in north India in the early medieval period. Ten inscriptions, ranging in date between AD 867 and 904, speak of the burgeoning city of Tattanandapura. It was also known as a *pattana* which clearly distinguished it from rural settlements like a *grama* and a *palli*. Its well laid out character is evident from the references to its small or narrow lanes (*kurathya*), wide roads (*brihadrathya*) and *hattamarga* (roads leading to the market centre). The *pattana* also had *avaris* or shops and *grihas* or

residential structures. An *avari* or shop is clearly mentioned to have consisted of three burnt brick rooms. Burnt bricks were also used for the construction of *grihas* or dwelling houses. The impressive size of the urban centre of Tattanandapura (Ahar) is unmistakable as it covers an area of 3800 acres. At Siyadoni, already discussed in the context of *mandapikas*, one encounters *aparasaraka* (houses with a porch or vestibule), *avasanika* (dwellings) and *grihabhitti* (house site). That there were several *hattas* in Siyadoni has already been pointed out. Another town existed at Gwalior under the name Gopagiri or Gopadri. Inscriptions indicate the presence of important royal functionaries like the *kottapala* (chief of a fort) and *baladhikrita* (a military commander) at Gopadri where *sresthis* and *sarthavahas* also were active. At many of these new *pattanas* or *puris* one notes the active role of various craftsmen: oilmillers (*tailikas*), florists (*malakaras*), and distillers (*kallapala*). At these centers existed important shrines where converged merchants, administrators, craftsmen and religious personalities. Thus these centers often combined economic, political and cultural functions which rendered them with considerable complexities as urban areas. We have already pointed out how some of the *mandapikas* in north India assumed urban character. The transformation of Naddula from a village to a *nagara* and then finally as the political centre of the local Chahamanas rulers has already been discussed. Trade seems to have played an important role in the making of Naddula as an urban centre. In eastern India, the early historical city of Pundranagara, represented by the remains at Mahasthangarh, does not indicate any discontinuity in its urban traditions in the early middle ages. Moreover, a few new cities also came into existence in early medieval Bengal: for instance, Ramavati—named after Ramapala, identified with the site of Amati; the city of Lakhnauti, mentioned by Minhaj-us Siraj was situated in Gaur and established by and named after Lakshmanasena, the late twelfth century Sena king of Bengal. These data may not portray widespread de-urbanisation in north India, particularly during the AD 600-1000 phase.

Besides the empirical statements on early medieval urban centers another point requires serious consideration. The principal factor behind the assumed decay of cities appears to have been a slump in long-distance trade after AD 500. The historiography of Indian feudal formation also suggests that after AD 1000 there was an urban revival in north India. It is implicitly indicated that increasing Arab trade with India favoured the spurt in urbanism after AD 1000. In other words, the growth and decay of urban centers of early India, from this point of view, are explained in terms of external trade of India, in other words, in terms of some external stimuli. It is interesting to note that the genesis of early historical urbanism is sought in the availability of iron technology and the resultant agrarian surplus. In other words, commerce including external trade is not projected as the primary cause for the emergence and proliferation of urban centers in early historical times. But the decline of the same cities is explained in terms of the assumed slump in trade. If agrarian growth is considered conducive to city formation then there should be logically no hindrance to it in early medieval times also. There is an overall agreement among scholars that the early middle ages witnessed unprecedented agrarian expansion in India. This would facilitate the availability and procurement of the vital agrarian surplus which is a major pre-requisite for city formation in early India. Hemachandra, the famous Jaina author of late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, observed that the villages often resembled cities (*gramaschapurasannibha*). A typical case in point could have been in this context the village of Naddula in Rajasthan. Either some early medieval villages became large enough in area to have assumed an urban

appearance, or agrarian expansion paved the way for greater concentration of population in some villages which consequently underwent a change in their character. It has been rightly observed that many urban centers of early medieval times were strongly integrated to their respective local or regional roots. On the other hand cities of the early historical times grew mainly by following the pattern of cities of middle Ganga plains. Middle Ganga plains thus played the role of an epicentre to early historical urbanization. Early medieval cities had no such epicentre. This gave them a distinctive character; that is why cities of early medieval times are thought by some scholars to have belonged to the third phase of urbanization in India.

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## 14.5 SUMMARY

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The period heralds the decline of the Roman (c.A.D. 250) and the Kushana empires (c. AD 262) effecting India's flourishing long distance trade. However, the merchant communities continued to be active during this period and the guilds flourished. The references to the *sarthvaha* and *nagarsresthis* appear frequently in the inscriptions. The evidences are also replete with information on markets. Seaborne contacts with Malaya Peninsula and South China Sea continued unabated. The minting of the finest gold and silver coinage during the Gupta period is also the indicator of flourishing economy of the period. The period also saw continued urban growth.

There is a long drawn debate among the scholars whether there was urban decay or there existed considerable growth during the Gupta and the post Gupta periods. Those favouring the theory of urban decay argue that on account of the decline of trade with the Roman empire, and the Huna inroads adversely affected the trading activities in India. The period saw sharp decline of the growth of urban centres; trade also declined; there was also near absence of metallic money (gold and silver) instead there increased the usage of cowrie shells indicating the decline of long distance trade for cowries could only largely be used for smaller transactions. Thus they emphasized that there was an emphatic decline in the long distance trade. Instead land grants increased manifold, decrease in trading activities gave way to self-sufficient village economy that ultimately created the conditions for the rise of feudalism in India.

However, those who contradict the argument they insist that the picture presented was too gloomy. They emphasize that neither the market places disappear altogether nor does there was a slump in trade in North-India. Rather rise of the Islam paved the way for brisk commercial activities in the region. Bengal continued to enjoy superiority in trade and commerce. References to *vanik*, *sarthavaha* and *shresthi* continued. The argument that there was a distinct decline in the metallic money, however, does not indicate the decline in trading activities for the cowries that were used for trading in Bengal in large number were itself not the product of Bengal rather brought to Bengal from as far as Maldives. Harikela continued to enjoy status of high zone of commercial activities during this period. We get good amount of high quality silver coins struck in this area. Even the coin-hoards dominated by Gujara-Pratiharas demonstrate the large volume of coin circulation in North India. To add to this growth of urban centers also continued unabated. There is no doubt that the old centers showed signs of decline but there emerged many new instead. The period also experienced the 'unprecedented agrarian expansion'.

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## 14.6 GLOSSARY

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### **Abbasid Caliphate**

In AD 750, the Umayyad Caliphs were replaced by the Abbasid. In AD 762 they moved the capital from Damascus to in Syria to the New City of Baghdad in Iraq. The Abbasid ruled all over western Asia and North Africa from AD 750 until about 1000, when they began to weaken. At first North Africa broke away and formed the independent kingdom under the Fatimids. In AD 1258 the Abbasid dynasty ended.

### **Al Babelhun Arakan**

Arakan is surrounded by India in the North, Burma in the East and Bangladesh in the West. The mountain range called Arakan Roma (Rakhaing Roma) acts as a barrier against inter-communication between the people of Burma and Arakan. It is bounded on the southwest by the Bay of Bengal. Arakan is presently under the Union of Burma.

### **Fatimid Caliphate**

The Fatimids ruled over North Africa, Egypt and Palestine from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. The Fatimids claimed to be descendants of Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, and wife of Ali, the fourth Caliph and first Shia Imam. The ultimate goal of the Fatimids was to replace the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad with their own when Caliph Ubayd Allah proclaimed himself Caliph at Cairo in 909 in opposition to the Sunni Caliph of Baghdad. They established a new sea route to Asia via Red Sea, instead of the earlier more frequented route via Persian Gulf.

### **Gurjara-Pratihara**

The Dynasty was founded by Nagabhata I in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The kingdom reached at its peak under king Bhoja (836-90) and Mahendrapala (890-910). It had its capital at Kanauj. The dynasty was weakened by repeated attacks of the Rashtrakutas in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and its power completely broken when Mohamed Ghazni sacked Kanauj in 1018 A.D.

### **Huna**

They were nomadic and pastoral people from Central Asia. They were Mongolian in appearance. They enjoyed military superiority due to their rapid horse power. The Huns appear in history in 3 c. BC when the Great Wall of China was erected to exclude them from China. The Hun kingdom was centered in modern Hungary. Attila (AD 434-453) was their most powerful king. Hun's rule extended

from the Rhine across the north of the Black Sea as far as the Caspian Sea. The Guptas also fell prey to the Huna inroads in AD 480. They overran the whole of North India. They succeeded for a brief period of 30 years to establish their kingdom in Malwa around AD 500 under the leadership of Toramana. His son and successor Mihircula conquered North India but soon driven into Kashmir by Yashodharman where he died in about AD 542.

### Malay Peninsula

It is what is today Peninsular Malaysia and Ocean of adjacent islands of southeast Asia including the east coast of Sumatra, the coast of Borneo, and smaller islands that lie between these areas. It lies between the Andaman sea of the Indian Ocean and the strait of Malacca on the west and the Gulf of Thailand and the South China sea on the east. The northern part of the Peninsula forms a part of Thailand; the southern part constitutes west Malaysia, the Malayan part of Malaysia.

### Red Ware

A type of a pottery red in colour but not painted. It is baked to red. It was more common in coastal Gujarat and Indus delta to south-west of Iraq.

### Sasanid Empire (226-651 A.D.)

They established an empire roughly within the frontiers achieved by the Achaemenids, with the capital Ctesiphon. The dynasty was founded by the king Ardashir I who was the vessel of Parthian ruler. Shapur I (241-272) inflicted crushing defeats on Romas twice later he also attacked the Kushanas and occupied Peshawar, the capital of Kushanas. The last Sasanid ruler was Yazdgerd III (632-636). The Arabas took Ctesiphon and in 651, the last Sassanian king died as a fugitive.

### Western Kshatrapa Rulers

A Saka ruling house ruled over Western India and Malwa.

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## 14.7 EXERCISES

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- 1) Analyse the role of inscriptions and coinage in assessing the development of trade and commerce during AD 300-1300.
- 2) In the light of Hsuan Tsang's account critically examine the commercial activities during AD 300-1300.
- 3) Discuss the debates among the historians over the issue of urban decay. In your opinion which argument stands out more convincing and why?

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## 14.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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