

Bharat as a Civilization of Cities: Ancient Urban Traditions and Contemporary Urban India

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Abstract

India's urban heritage extends back over 5,000 years to the Indus Valley Civilization, making it one of the world's oldest continuous urban traditions. This paper explores the deep historical roots of Indian urbanism from the sophisticated city planning of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro to the sacred cities of the Vedic period, and traces their influence on contemporary urban India. As India undergoes rapid urbanization—projected to add 416 million urban residents by 2050—understanding these ancient urban traditions becomes crucial for addressing modern challenges. The paper examines the continuities and transformations between ancient and contemporary urban forms, analyzing how historical urban principles might inform India's Smart Cities Mission and sustainable urban development goals.

Keywords: Indus Valley Civilization, Urban sanitation systems, Smart Cities Mission India, Ancient urban planning, Urban governance, Sustainable cities, Water infrastructure, Urbanization challenges.

Introduction

India's identity as a civilization of cities stretches back millennia, predating many of the world's renowned ancient urban centers. While contemporary discourse often portrays India as predominantly rural, this narrative obscures a profound urban heritage that has shaped the subcontinent's cultural, economic, and political landscape for over five thousand years. From the meticulously planned cities of the Indus Valley Civilization to the bustling commercial hubs of the Mauryan Empire, and from the temple cities of the medieval period to today's technology-driven smart cities, urban India represents a remarkable continuity of human settlement and innovation.

Today, India stands at a critical juncture in its urban trajectory. With approximately 35% of its 1.4 billion people currently residing in urban areas, the nation is experiencing one of the largest urbanization waves in human history. By 2050, India is expected to add 416 million people to its cities—the largest projected urban population increase globally. This transformation has profound implications: urban areas already contribute 63% to India's GDP, a figure projected to reach 75% by 2030. Understanding India's ancient urban traditions becomes not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for navigating this unprecedented urban future.

Ancient Urban Traditions: The Foundation of Indian Urbanism

The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE)

The Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Harappan Civilization, represents one of humanity's earliest experiments in large-scale urban planning. At its zenith around 2600 BCE, this civilization encompassed an area larger than ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia combined, covering approximately one million square kilometers across modern-day Pakistan, northwestern India, and parts of Afghanistan. The civilization supported over 1,000 settlements, with five major urban centers: Harappa, Mohenjo-daro,

Ganeriwala, Dholavira, and Rakhigarhi.

What distinguished Indus cities was their remarkable urban sophistication. Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, the two most extensively excavated sites, reveal urban planning principles that were extraordinarily advanced for their time. The cities were laid out on a precise grid system, with main streets running north-south and east-west, intersected by smaller lanes and alleys. This geometric precision facilitated efficient movement of people and goods while enabling systematic expansion. The uniform layout across different Indus cities suggests centralized planning authority and shared urban design principles across a vast geographical area.

The engineering achievements of Indus cities were equally impressive. Archaeological evidence reveals the world's first known urban sanitation systems, with sophisticated drainage networks that were far more advanced than contemporary systems in Mesopotamia or Egypt. Individual houses drew water from wells—Mohenjo-daro alone had over 700 wells, approximately one for every three houses. Wastewater was directed to covered drains on main streets, which connected to larger sewers running beneath the city. Even the smallest homes on city outskirts were connected to this centralized system, demonstrating a commitment to public health and cleanliness as civic priorities.

The cities featured standardized fired-brick construction, with bricks produced in uniform ratios that remained consistent across the civilization. Urban centers were typically divided into two main sectors: a raised citadel area containing public buildings, granaries, and what may have been administrative structures, and a lower town with residential quarters and commercial areas. Notable structures include the Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro—a large, rectangular pool lined with waterproof bricks, likely used for ritual bathing—and massive granaries for food storage with sophisticated ventilation systems to prevent spoilage.

Vedic and Classical Period Cities (1500 BCE - 600 CE)

Following the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization around 1900 BCE, urban traditions in India underwent transformation but did not disappear. The Vedic period (1500-600 BCE) saw the emergence of a different urban pattern, with cities developing along the fertile Gangetic plains. Unlike the Indus cities' emphasis on geometric planning, many Vedic-era cities evolved organically around sacred sites, trade routes, and political centers.

Varanasi, believed to have been settled around 1200 BCE, stands as one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. Its endurance for over three millennia testifies to the resilience of Indian urban traditions. The city developed as a spiritual and cultural capital, attracting scholars, philosophers, and artisans. Its ghats—stepped embankments along the Ganges River—became centers of ritual, commerce, and social life, creating a unique urban form that integrated sacred geography with urban function.

The Mauryan period (322-185 BCE) witnessed the flourishing of imperial urbanism. Pataliputra, established around 490 BCE and later serving as the Mauryan capital, became possibly the largest city in the world during the 4th century BCE. Greek and Chinese travelers described a magnificent metropolis with massive timber palisades, 64 gates, and 570 towers. The city's strategic location at the confluence of the Ganges and Son rivers gave it commercial advantages, while its sophisticated administration became a model for urban governance throughout the empire.

Ujjain, capital of the Avanti Kingdom, emerged as a crucial center for trade, astronomy, and learning. The city's location made it the traditional zero meridian in ancient Indian geography—the reference point for longitude measurements. This scientific significance attracted scholars who made groundbreaking advances in mathematics and astronomy. The city also served as a major commercial hub, connecting northern and southern India through extensive trade networks.

Taxila, situated at the crossroads of major trade routes between India, Central Asia, and the Middle East, became renowned as a center of learning and commerce. The University of Taxila attracted scholars from across Asia, making it an early example of an international university city. The city's exposure to diverse cultures—from the Mauryan Empire to the Indo-Greek Kingdom to the Kushan Empire—created a cosmopolitan urban culture that enriched its intellectual and artistic life.

Characteristics of Ancient Indian Urban Planning

Several distinctive features characterized ancient Indian urbanism. First, the integration of sacred and secular spaces was fundamental. Unlike the separation of religious and civic life in many Western traditions, Indian cities seamlessly blended temples, ghats, and ritual spaces with markets, residences, and administrative buildings. This integration reflected a worldview where the spiritual and material were interconnected rather than opposed.

Second, water management was central to urban design. From the wells and drainage systems of the Indus cities to the ghats and water reservoirs of later periods, Indian cities demonstrated sophisticated understanding of hydrology and public health. The emphasis on cleanliness and sanitation, evident in both Indus Valley sites and later texts like the Arthashastra, established enduring principles for urban life.

Third, guild-based economic organization shaped urban structure. Artisans, merchants, and professionals organized into shrenis (guilds) that regulated quality, set prices, and resolved disputes. These guilds often occupied specific neighborhoods, creating districts organized by occupation and craft. This system provided economic stability while fostering specialized expertise and innovation.

Fourth, the absence of monumental palaces or temples in Indus cities, combined with evidence of relatively egalitarian housing, suggests governance structures that differed from the hierarchical models of contemporary civilizations. While later Indian cities did feature royal palaces and grand temples, the persistence of relatively democratic urban institutions like guild councils and neighborhood assemblies maintained elements of participatory governance.

Contemporary Urban India: Continuity and Transformation

Modern India's urbanization presents both continuities with and departures from its ancient urban traditions. As of 2024, approximately 35% of India's population lives in urban areas—a figure that has grown from 18% in 1960. The pace of urbanization is accelerating: India is projected to add 600 million urban residents by 2050, representing the largest urbanization wave in human history concentrated within a single nation.

This transformation is geographically diverse. While megacities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore capture headlines, over half of India's urban population resides in cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants. This distribution mirrors ancient patterns where urbanization was widespread rather than concentrated in a few megalopolises. Cities like Varanasi, Ujjain, and Madurai continue to thrive, their ancient cores surrounded by modern expansion, embodying millennia of continuous urban evolution.

The Smart Cities Mission, launched in 2015, represents India's most ambitious contemporary urban initiative. The program aims to develop 100 cities through technology-driven solutions, encompassing over 8,000 projects worth approximately Rs. 2 trillion. As of mid-2024, 90% of these projects have been completed, addressing areas such as water supply, waste management, urban mobility, and digital governance. Cities like Bhubaneswar, Pune, and Surat have emerged as leaders, implementing innovations in smart waste management, intelligent traffic systems, and digital service delivery.

However, contemporary Indian cities face formidable challenges that echo ancient urban concerns while

presenting new dimensions. Water scarcity afflicts many cities: approximately 50% of urban India lacks reliable 24-hour water supply, and aging infrastructure results in 30-50% water loss through leakage. The water crises in Chennai (2019) and Bangalore (2024) demonstrate the continuing centrality of water management to urban viability—a concern that preoccupied Indus Valley planners 4,500 years ago.

Environmental degradation poses severe threats. Nine of the world's ten most polluted cities are in India, with Delhi ranking as the most polluted capital for four consecutive years. Urban flooding has become increasingly common, with events in Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad revealing inadequate drainage systems—a stark contrast to the sophisticated stormwater management of ancient Indus cities.

Housing challenges are acute: the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs estimates an urban housing shortage of 18.78 million units, with over 65 million people living in slums or informal settlements. This represents approximately one-fifth of the urban population, creating stark inequalities in access to basic services. Traffic congestion and inadequate public transportation compound these problems, with many cities experiencing gridlock despite massive infrastructure investments.

Governance capacity presents perhaps the most fundamental challenge. Research in Rajasthan's small cities revealed that half of elected officials were unaware they could collect municipal taxes—highlighting gaps in knowledge and training that undermine urban administration. This echoes ancient concerns about effective governance, though the scale and complexity of modern urban systems make capacity-building far more challenging.

Learning from Ancient Traditions: Pathways Forward

India's ancient urban traditions offer valuable insights for contemporary challenges. The Indus Valley emphasis on universal access to water and sanitation—evidenced by household wells and comprehensive drainage—established a principle of equitable service delivery that modern cities struggle to achieve. Reviving this commitment to universal basic services could guide infrastructure prioritization in the Smart Cities Mission.

The guild system's role in economic organization and quality regulation suggests potential for community-based urban governance. Modern equivalents might include resident welfare associations, neighborhood committees, and local area planning mechanisms that give citizens direct voice in urban development—approaches already being piloted in some Indian cities through participatory budgeting and area sabhas.

The integration of sacred and secular spaces in ancient cities created multi-functional urban environments that served economic, social, and spiritual needs simultaneously. Contemporary urban planning's tendency toward single-use zoning could benefit from this more integrated approach, creating neighborhoods that combine residential, commercial, institutional, and recreational functions in ways that reduce transportation needs and strengthen community bonds.

The standardization evident in Indus brick sizes and city layouts suggests the value of common technical standards while allowing local adaptation. Modern initiatives like the Model Building Bye-Laws and urban design guidelines attempt similar standardization, though implementation remains uneven. Strengthening these frameworks while maintaining flexibility for local context could improve consistency without sacrificing appropriate diversity.

Conclusion

Bharat's identity as a civilization of cities rests on over five millennia of continuous urban tradition. From the grid-planned cities of the Indus Valley to the sacred geography of Varanasi, from the imperial grandeur of Pataliputra to the cosmopolitan learning centers like Taxila, Indian urbanism has demonstrated

remarkable innovation, adaptation, and endurance. These ancient traditions established principles—universal service delivery, integrated land use, community-based governance, and sophisticated infrastructure—that remain relevant to contemporary urban challenges.

As India navigates the largest urban transformation in human history, understanding these traditions becomes crucial. The challenges are formidable: providing housing, water, sanitation, and transportation for 600 million additional urban residents by 2050 requires investment estimated at \$840 billion by 2036. Yet India's urban heritage demonstrates that the subcontinent has successfully managed large-scale urbanization before, adapting traditional principles to changing circumstances while maintaining cultural continuity.

The Smart Cities Mission represents an opportunity to blend ancient wisdom with modern technology. Rather than viewing smart cities as purely technological interventions, Indian urban policy could integrate historical urban principles with contemporary capabilities. This might mean combining IoT sensors with traditional water harvesting techniques, linking digital governance platforms with neighborhood assemblies, or designing mixed-use developments that echo the integrated land use of ancient cities.

Ultimately, recognizing Bharat as a civilization of cities challenges both the rural-India narrative and the notion that urbanization is a recent or Western import. Indian urbanism has deep indigenous roots that predate many celebrated ancient civilizations. By honoring these traditions while embracing innovation, India can chart an urban future that is distinctively its own—one that draws strength from historical continuity while addressing contemporary challenges with confidence and creativity. The cities of 2050 can build upon the foundations laid at Mohenjo-daro, Varanasi, and Pataliputra, creating urban environments that are simultaneously ancient and modern, rooted and innovative, uniquely Indian and globally significant.

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