

Ancient Indian City life and Rural Complex: The Study, critic and comparative analysis

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ABSTRACT

“What if everything that occurred in past, is influenced by the future?”, this quote may not be making sense right now but at the end of this paper, this will one of the major outcomes which would absolutely be making sense. Cities is not a phenomenon which occurs overnight, yet it emerged out of an evolutionary procedure. In this paper, we are depicting dichotomy between urban and rural life but urban settlement has only emerged from the rural one. There is a catch, that not all the rural settlements had transformed into urban ones.

Ancient India, a land of rich cultural heritage and historical significance, witnessed the flourishing of both urban centres and rural settlements. We are going to delve into the intricate relationship between ancient Indian city life and the rural complex, exploring their unique characteristics, interdependencies, and evolution over time. By examining archaeological evidence, literary sources, and comparative analyses, this study aims to shed light on the social, economic, and political dynamics that shaped these distinct yet interconnected spheres of ancient Indian society. Through a critical lens, we will unravel the complexities of urban-rural interactions, challenge conventional narratives and offering fresh perspectives on the multifaceted nature of ancient Indian civilization.

The ‘basics’

The definition of Villages and cities have also been following the process of evolution. . Grāma in the Rigveda has been interpreted as two types:

- **Rigveda 10.62.10:**

"grāmāṇām vīrāṇām adhvareshu"

This verse speaks of the involvement of the community or group (grāma), which is settled, perform sacrifices or rituals.

- **Rigveda 6.45.31:**

"anūṣata grāmam yuvānam anuṣṭutam"

Here, **grāma** is associated with a moving or advancing group, possibly reflecting the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Vedic people where the community could also imply a mobile tribal unit.

Samarangana Sutradhara (11th-century poetic treatise on classical Indian architecture), The unit of the national planning, according to this text is a village. It also mentions that, the planning of ancient Indian Villages reflects a broader national vision. Despite India's vast size and diverse regions, its strong cultural and religious unity fostered a sense of cohesive national identity, evident in the approach to planning under rulers like Pṛthu and architects like Viśvakarmā. This national planning, particularly relevant for a subcontinent like India, involved dividing the country into three distinct regions – large, medium, and small – a classification that likely influenced the character and organization of individual settlements within each region.

“Cities are more than just large, densely populated settlements. Cities are characterized by their complex social, economic, and political structures. They serve as hubs for administration, trade, craft production, and cultural activities, often supporting a diverse population with specialized roles.”- Kenoyer, J. M. (1998). *Ancient cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*. Oxford University Press.

The first known cities emerged around 5000 years ago in the Great Indus Valley Civilization, such as Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro etc.

Ancient Town Planning

Before We dive into the complexities of different phased village and city life, we must also sight what has been documented in different scriptures about how the planning of an area was being executed according to the various basis. Ancient Indian treatises, including the Vedas, Puranas, Artha Sastra, and Sukra Nitisara, meticulously delineate town planning principles grounded in Vastu Shastra. These texts categorized settlements according to their function, encompassing jana (populace), nagara (urban center), grama (rural village), kheta (agrarian settlement), and durga (fortified stronghold), each subject to specific regulatory guidelines. The Vastu Purusha Mandala, a diagram predicated on cosmic principles, served as a cornerstone of architectural design, dictating the spatial arrangement and dimensional attributes of edifices.

Village layouts typically conformed to square or rectangular configurations (e.g., Chaturshranga or Ayataakara formations), circumscribed by defensive walls and ditches. The grama frequently featured a central shrine consecrated to the village deity, a reservoir for water procurement, and a communal hall (sabha) for assemblies. Emphasis was placed on agricultural pursuits, with designated areas allocated for arable land and pastures. Sustaining the livelihoods of the laboring populace (cultivators, artisans) was paramount, and infrastructure such as dams (e.g., the Sudarsana lake, as documented in inscriptions) and gardens were provisioned. The Artha Sastra prescribes specific proportional allocations of land contingent upon caste and occupational status.

Urban planning prioritized central locations proximate to perennial water sources (rivers, lakes), with layouts varying in accordance with topographical characteristics. Cities such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (while pre-Vedic, they exemplify sophisticated planning) exhibit grid-like street patterns, advanced drainage systems, and citadels for defensive purposes.

Discrete marketplaces (apana) for diverse commodities were indispensable. Protective ramparts and moats of specified dimensions, as detailed in texts like the Manasara, were crucial. A meticulously planned network of thoroughfares, comprising principal avenues and subsidiary lanes, facilitated efficient circulation. Provisions for urban expansion, such as the relocation of surplus population to nascent settlements (nagara extensions), were also contemplated. The Sukra Nitisara explicates the hierarchy of municipal officials and their respective roles. Intercity connectivity, facilitated by well-maintained thoroughfares and commercial routes, was significant. Tax exemptions for migrants in newly established settlements fostered sustainable urban development, as corroborated by historical accounts of recently founded cities.

Both village and city planning reflected prevailing religious tenets. Temples, dedicated to divinities such as Indra, Agni, or Varuna, served as focal points. Residential precincts were frequently stratified by caste (e.g., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras), mirroring the social hierarchy. The Manusmriti and other texts delineate the social structure and associated spatial arrangements.

Security considerations were paramount. City walls, gateways (gopura), and moats constituted essential features. Fortresses (durga), often strategically positioned, furnished supplementary protection. The Artha Sastra devotes considerable attention to fort design, encompassing the emplacement of ramparts, towers, and armories. The concept of Kosha (treasury) and its secure emplacement within the city was also critical.

Ancient Indian texts, such as the Manasara Shilpa Shastra, provide detailed descriptions of settlement plans. These texts categorize ancient towns based on size, shape, and purpose.

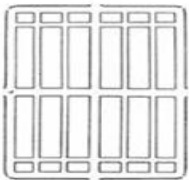
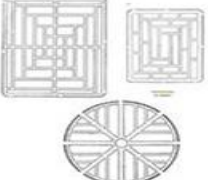
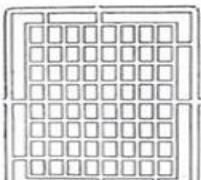
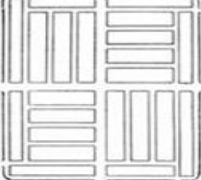
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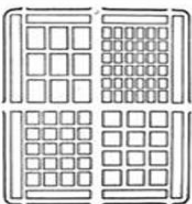
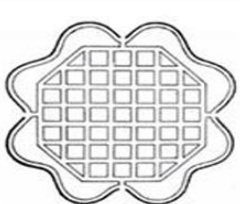
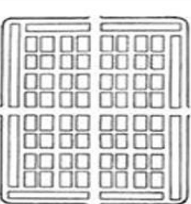
- **Rajdhani:** The king's capital city.
- **Sakhanagra:** A general term encompassing all towns *except* a Pura. This category includes various sizes of settlements.
- **Karvata:** A smaller town.
- **Nigma:** Smaller than a Karvata.
- **Grama:** Smaller than a Nigma (typically a village).
- **Special Towns:**
 - **Pattana:** A secondary or alternate residence/town, often used by royalty or important figures.
 - **Putabhedana:** Similar to a Pattana but with the added function of being a significant commercial center.

Categorization by Shape and Purpose:

Ancient Indian texts describe various town layouts, each with a specific name and characteristics:

- **Dandaka:** Elongated rectangle or oval, often along trade routes (e.g., Ujjain).
- **Nandyavarta:** Circular or spiral, with streets radiating from a central point (e.g., Madurai).
- **Sarvatozhadra:** Square or rectangular grid pattern (e.g., Pataliputra).
- **Swastika:** Pattern resembling the swastika symbol, with streets at right angles (e.g., Mohenjo-daro).
- **Prastara:** Linear layout, with parallel streets (e.g., Varanasi).
- **Padmaka:** Circular or semi-circular, lotus-shaped, with a central plaza or temple (e.g., Hampi).
- **Karmuka:** Triangular or wedge-shaped, tapering to a point (e.g., Thanjavur).
- **Chaturmukha:** Quadrilateral or square grid pattern (e.g., Udaipur).

DANDAKA	NANDYAVARTA	SARVATOBHADRA	SWASTIKA
			
• Literally means a phalanx or A staff. • It is usually a rectangular or square. • Its streets are straight and cross each other At right angles. • No. Of streets vary from one to five running Parallel to each other. • Streets at extremes have single row of Houses and streets at center are lined with Double row of houses. • Town offices and panchayats are located in The eastern portion of the town. • This type of town is considered auspicious For brahmins. It may contain 12, 24, 50, 108, or 300 brahmin families.	• It may be square or oblong. • It is divided in 4 main vitthis. • The town has four large streets along the sides. • This type of layout is like a mystic figure Nandyavarta. • There can be three. Five or seven sets of such Streets, with a row of houses on each side. • The lanes which are traverse between the main Roads should have no houses. • Vitthis is a streets which is lined with houses. • Marga is a streets which is devoid of any Houses. • Small roads are at interval of six or seven rajjus (1 rajju = 10 dandas = 60 feet). • Usually streets are 3, 4 or 5 dandas wide	• It is oblong or square and divided into interlineal chambers. • In center temple dedicated to brahma, vishnu and shiva is Located. • No. Of car streets varies form one to five with a boulevard going Around the village. • Pavillions, rest houses, colleges halls at several corners. • Town is secured by a wall and a ditch with four large Gates on the sides and many gates at corners. • Drapers and weavers have their quarters in between West and the south west. • Blacksmiths are to be quartered between varuna and vayu And further opposite to them are fishermen and the Butchers. • Physicians are to assigned between vayu and soma. • By the side of eastern wall temple of chamunda is Erected. • Huts of chandalas and outcastes in the further outer Proximity. • Tanks and reservoirs should be constructed either in South or in the intermediate quaters.	Based on mystic figure Swastika. • There are two streets passing through Center. • Traversing streets are planted in clock Wise direction. • Ramparts defend the village and a ditch is to enclose these rampart. • There are eight gates . • Kings palace should be erected in the Four cardinal direction, in the cell of Aryama or others. • Temple at the center. • The bhuddhist temple should be established on the plot of vayu and jains temple in south-west in the cell of nitri • Temple of durga and ganesh in four Directions. • The outer most road is lined with single row of houses while other streets have Double row of houses

PRASTARA	PADMAKA	KARMUKHA	CHATURMUKHA
			
Literally it means a Village resembling a couch • This town is either square or oblong. • Space is divided into 4, 9, or 16 wards by A network of streets. • These streets vary from 6, 7, 8, 9, or 11 Dandas. • In wards roads are planted in chess board System. But they are not divide in equal No of plots. • Division was according to degree of Rank or wealth of the person. • The village is enclosed walls and ditches With four principal gates on south and Subsidiary ones in the corners.	Mayamata says There are five variety of this village. • Its length and breadth are made Equal while the enclosing walls are Circular or it can be quadrangular, Hexagonal, or octagonal. • The divide edifice or council house Should be at the center. • Round about this plot should be Planted streets no. Four to eight and They are line with houses. • There should be gates in four Cardinal directions.	Literally means a bow. • Its shape is semi circular or semi Elliptical, like a bow. • This type of plan is used at sea shore. • Towns like pattana, kheta, or khavarta Are planned in this manner. • Pattana has preponderance of viasyas. • Kheta is generally inhabited by traders And laborers. • It has two car streets and one principal streets. • If bow faces west then one car streets runs from south to east and other from north to East and principal street runs from west to east and other runs from north to south. • No. Of traverse streets can be from one	It is square or oblong in shape lying east-west. • There are four car streets on four sides. • Two large streets crossing at right angles in the Center dividing the whole site into four blocks or Wards. • Four principal gates are raised placed on the Terminus of two highways and no. Of supplementary Gates at corner. • Each ward is planted with four smaller roads Crossed by same no. Of them. • The south eastern ward is allotted for brahmins.

	DANDAKA	SWASTIKA	PADMAKA	NADYAVARTAKA	PRASTARA	CHATURMUKHA	KARMUKHA	SARVATOBHADRA
Form	Square Oblong	Swastik	Circular Octagonal/	Square Circular	Square Oblong	Square oblong	Bow shape	Square oblong
Street Pattern	Straight, Intersect at Right angle	2 streets Passing Through Centre	Streets Aligned with The houses	Streets run Parallel to the centre	4 cardinal Streets and Supplement- ary streets	4 cardinal Streets and Supplement- ary streets	Main street N-s or e-w & Cross street at right Angle	Four street Around the Town and inner Streets
Plans Suitable For	Villages	Villages And town	Towns with No scope of Expansion	Commonly For village	Villages and Town	Largest towns to smallest Village	Suitable for Seashore or River front	Larger villages And towns
Division Of Blocks	Blocks with Lengths Twice or Thrice of Width	Rectangular Plots	Rectangular	Rectangular	Different Block size for Varried Classes	Modular Blocks	Quadrangu- lar Plots	Rectangular
City Wall and Moats	Not found	Rampart Wall with Water moat	Fortified in All sides	Rampart wall	May have Fortification	Not found	Rampart wall With water. Moat	City wall and a Ditch
Town Gates	Four gates In four Direction	Eight gates	Four gates in Four Direction	Four Gates	Four main Gate and Other gates At corners	Four main Gate and Other gates At corners	May have Desirable no. Of Gates	Four main gate & many gates At corners
Temples	Temples Found in Various Locations	Temple at The centre And four Direction	Temple at the Centre	Temple at the Centre	Temple at the Centre	Temple always At the centre	Temple found in Suitable Location	Temple at the Centre

Magadh Time

The Ganga Valley, considered the heart of northern India, experienced the intricate socio-economic and cultural dynamics linked to urbanization. The period between 600 and 300 BCE is recognized as the second phase of urbanization in Indian history. But there were also some areas which were still in village or rural form.

From the 6th century BCE onward, the political landscape of northern India became more defined, with rulers and spiritual leaders mentioned in various literary traditions emerging as identifiable historical figures. During the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, state polities and societies took shape across a region spanning from Gandhara in the northwest to Anga in the east, also extending into the Malwa region.

The Anguttara Nikaya enlists 16 large territorial polities (solasamahajanapadas):-

<u>MAHAJANAPADA</u>	<u>CAPITAL</u>
1. KASHI	VARANASI
2. KOSALA	SRAVASTI
3. ANGA	CHAMPA
4. MAGADHA	• RAJAGRIHA-GIRIVRAJA (FIRST CAPITAL) • PATALIPUTRA (LATER CAPITAL)
5. VRIJI	VAISHALI
6. MALLA	PAVA
7. CHEDI	SUKTIMATI
8. VATSA	KAUSAMBI
9. MATSYA	VAIRAT
10.SURASENA	MATHURA
11.KURU	HASTINAPURA
12.PANCHALA	I. AHICHHATRA II. KAMPILYA
13.ASMAKA	GOVARDHANA
14.AVANTI	I. UJJAYINI II. MAHISMATI
15.GANDHARA	TAKSHASHILA
16.KHAMBOJA	-

I would like to explain the urban and rural facets of one of the most popular Mahajan pada named Magadha. The most striking feature of the evolving material life in northern India was the emergence of urban centers. Nearly a millennium after the decline of Harappan urbanism, cities began to reappear in the subcontinent, marking the second wave of urbanization. Notably, from the 6th century BCE onward, there was a significant shift in the regions where these cities emerged. Unlike the Harappan period, the urban centers of this second urbanization were predominantly situated in the Ganga Valley, an area that had not previously experienced urban growth during the

Harappan era. The initial Magadha kingdom encompassed the modern-day Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar and boasted several important urban centers throughout its history. **Rajagriha**, initially called Girivrija, was strategically situated amidst five hills, providing natural defenses. It became the first capital of Magadh under Bimbisara, marking the beginning of Magadh's political rise. The city also held religious significance as the venue for the First Buddhist Council after the Buddha's death. Its cyclopean walls still stand, representing early construction skills.

Pataliputra succeeded Rajagriha as the capital, evolving from a fort built by Ajatashatru into a large city under Udayin. Its location at the confluence of the Ganges, Gandhaka, and Son rivers was advantageous for trade and communication. Pataliputra served as the capital for the Nanda, Maurya, Shunga, and Pala empires, highlighting its enduring political and administrative importance. The Greek ambassador Megasthenes described it as a vast and prosperous center with efficient governance. It was also a major hub for trade and a significant Buddhist center with numerous monasteries. **Vaishali** was unique as the capital of the Vajjika League, recognized as an early republic. It holds religious significance as the birthplace of Lord Mahavira (Jainism) and the site where the Buddha delivered his final sermon and the Second Buddhist Council was held. Vaishali was later annexed by Magadh under Ajatashatru. Beyond these capitals, other cities played crucial roles. **Gaya** was a major pilgrimage site for ancestor rituals like Pind daan. Nearby **Bodh Gaya** is revered as the place where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment. **Nalanda**, near Rajagriha, was home to an ancient university, signifying Magadh's intellectual prominence. **Champa** became a significant trading center after its conquest by Bimbisara, and **Bihar-sharif** was another notable town. These diverse urban centers demonstrate the multifaceted religious, cultural, and intellectual significance of the Magadh region.

Social in cities

The social structure of Magadh cities was largely defined by the **Varna system**, a hierarchical order that included Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This system dictated social status and occupations, with Shudras often involved in manual labor like agriculture and crafts, and sometimes subjected to slavery. Beyond this, a distinct group of **untouchables** emerged, positioned outside the Varna framework and relegated to the fringes of society. They were tasked with menial jobs, often lived separately, and relied on hunting and gathering. Notably, in the "Greater Magadha" region, there was a deviation from strict Vedic norms, where Kshatriyas were sometimes considered higher in status than Brahmanas, indicating some social flexibility or regional differences in the application of the Varna system. These social categories and their variations suggest a society undergoing change and influenced by local customs.

Family and kinship were fundamental to Magadhan society, deeply connected to the caste system and patriarchal norms. There was a strong preference for sons over daughters due to the perceived need for male heirs to continue the lineage and perform necessary funerary rituals, highlighting a lower social value placed on women. Extended families based on the male line (Kula) and broader networks of relatives (Natakas, Nati, and Nati-Kulani) played significant roles in social life and within the framework of the caste system. The emphasis on lineage and patriarchal structures heavily influenced social organization and individual roles within the community.

The **status of women** in Magadh cities presents a complex picture. While generally holding a subordinate position within the patriarchal structure, potentially reinforced by the practice of marrying within one's caste, there are indications of a more nuanced reality. During the Mauryan period, some accounts suggest that women held high positions and even served as the King's personal bodyguards, suggesting possibilities for female agency and influence. Furthermore, in

certain periods, women were reportedly allowed to divorce or remarry, indicating some legal and social flexibility. The example of Amrapali, a prominent royal courtesan in Vaishali who later became a Buddhist nun, also suggests that women could achieve social recognition or pursue alternative paths outside traditional domestic roles. These varied accounts suggest that while patriarchal norms were dominant, the social roles and status of women in Magadh cities were not uniformly restrictive.

The Greek historian **Megasthenes** offered valuable insights into Magadhan society, describing its division into seven hereditary occupational groups with restrictions on marriage between them. He noted a general simplicity in daily life, with men typically wearing three pieces of unstitched cloth. However, wealth was evident in the attire of some, with the affluent favoring colored garments adorned with gold and precious stones and using sunshades carried by attendants. Interestingly, Megasthenes also reported a remarkably low crime rate in Pataliputra during the Mauryan period, with people leaving their houses unguarded, suggesting an effective system of social order and governance. He also mentioned that injuries to artisans were severely punished, especially those causing loss of limbs or eyes.

The emergence and treatment of **untouchables** represent a significant aspect of social inequality in ancient Magadh. This marginalized group, positioned below the Shudras, lived outside the main settlements, often relying on hunting and gathering for survival and assigned to perform menial and ritually "polluting" tasks such as animal slaughter and leatherworking. They faced severe social discrimination, being denied access to public resources like wells and temples. Their exclusion from mainstream society highlights the rigid and discriminatory nature of the social hierarchy in ancient Magadh.

1. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar (1977). *Ancient India*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ. ISBN 8120804368.

2. Agrawala, V. S. (1953). *India as known to Pāṇini*. Lucknow Publishing House.

Economic

The geographical location of Magadh within the Gangetic valley provided an exceptionally fertile alluvial plain, ideally suited for supporting intensive agricultural practices. The consistent deposition of nutrient-rich silt from the Ganges and Son rivers created land that was highly productive, allowing for substantial agricultural yields. This inherent fertility was a primary driver of Magadh's economic strength, enabling the production of surplus food that sustained a large population, including the inhabitants of its burgeoning urban centers. Beyond mere sustenance, this agricultural abundance formed the bedrock for other economic activities and directly contributed to the power of the Magadhan state and its military. The high productivity of the land allowed for a significant portion of the population to engage in non-agricultural pursuits, fostering specialization and the growth of urban centers. Furthermore, the surplus produce served as a crucial base for taxation, providing the state with the necessary resources for its various functions.

A well-established system of land taxation (Bhaga), primarily through the collection of a share of the agricultural produce known as Bhaga, formed the backbone of the Magadhan state's revenue. Typically, the state levied a tax of one-fourth or one-sixth of the produced grain. This systematic collection of land tax provided the Magadhan rulers with a consistent and substantial source of income, which was essential for financing the administrative machinery, maintaining a large and powerful army, and investing in the development of public infrastructure. The predictable nature of this revenue stream allowed the state to effectively plan and execute its various functions, contributing significantly to the overall stability and economic prosperity of the empire.

In addition to the land tax collected from privately cultivated lands, the Magadhan state directly managed certain lands known as Sita or crown lands. These lands were under the supervision of an official called Sitadhyaksa, whose responsibility was to oversee their cultivation and ensure the efficient production of agricultural goods. The produce from these crown lands flowed directly into the royal treasury, providing an additional and guaranteed source of revenue for the state, independent of the regular land tax. This direct management allowed the rulers to have greater control over resources and likely supported the royal household and specific state-sponsored projects, further bolstering the financial strength of the Magadhan Empire. Beyond land tax, the Magadh Empire employed other forms of taxation to generate revenue from different sectors of the economy. Pindakara was a tax assessed on groups of villages, indicating a collective responsibility for revenue payment. Cash taxes, known as Bali and Hiranaya, were also collected, likely on specific types of crops or transactions. Additionally, tolls (Shaulkika) were imposed on merchandise, reflecting the importance of trade to the state's finances. This diversified taxation system allowed the empire to draw revenue from various economic activities, ensuring a more stable financial foundation.

Tax Name	Description	Sector/Activity Taxed
Bhaga	Share of agricultural produce (1/4 or 1/6)	Agriculture (land)
Pindakara	Tax assessed on groups of villages	Village communities
Bali	Cash tax	Peasants, potentially specific crops
Hiranaya	Cash tax	Peasants, potentially specific crops
Shaulkika	Tolls imposed on merchandise	Trade and commerce
Vishti	Forced labor	Labor (primarily Vaishya and Shudra)

1. Kings, Farmers and Towns - NCERT, accessed on March 17, 2025, <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/lehs102.pdf>

2. *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange Within and Beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia*, by Jason Neelis, BRILL, 2010.

3. Basham, A. L. (1954). *The wonder that was India*. Sidgwick & Jackson.

Political

The political landscape of Magadh saw the rise and fall of several dynasties, each leaving its mark on the kingdom's development. The Brihadratha dynasty is recognized as the earliest to rule Magadh. Following them, the Haryanka dynasty, featuring prominent rulers like Bimbisara, Ajatashatru, and

Udayin, initiated Magadh's expansion and strengthened its foundation. Bimbisara employed strategies like matrimonial alliances, diplomacy with powerful neighbors, and conquest of weaker ones to expand his territory. Rajagriha was the initial capital under this dynasty, chosen for its natural defenses, but Udayin later shifted the capital to Pataliputra due to its central location advantageous for controlling the growing empire. The Shishunaga dynasty continued the expansion, notably defeating Avanti and briefly moving the capital to Vaishali before it was eventually returned to Pataliputra. The Nanda dynasty, under rulers such as Mahapadma Nanda and Dhana Nanda, established a vast and powerful empire with a large army; Mahapadma Nanda is even considered by some as India's "first historical emperor" due to his extensive conquests. The Maurya dynasty, founded by Chandragupta Maurya, marked the peak of Magadh's power, unifying a large part of the Indian subcontinent under its rule from Pataliputra. This progression of dynasties demonstrates a trend towards greater centralization and territorial expansion, with the choice of capital reflecting strategic and administrative needs.

Several key rulers significantly influenced Magadh's political journey. Bimbisara is famous for his strategic matrimonial alliances, expansionist military policies, and establishing Magadh's first standing army. His son, Ajatashatru, was known for his aggressive military campaigns, including the long conquest of Vaishali, and for fortifying Rajagriha; he also utilized advanced weapons like the Mahashilakantaka and Rathamusala. Udayin's relocation of the capital to Pataliputra was a crucial administrative and strategic decision. Mahapadma Nanda's creation of a large empire and his reputation as a powerful ruler left a lasting impact. Chandragupta Maurya, guided by Chanakya, successfully overthrew the Nandas and founded the Mauryan Empire, ushering in an era of unified rule. Ashoka, Chandragupta's grandson, is renowned for his adoption of Buddhism and his subsequent policies promoting peace and social welfare (Dhamma), which significantly shaped the empire's social and political landscape. The ambitions, strategic skills, and administrative abilities of these individual rulers were vital to Magadh's rise to prominence.

Magadh's governance was characterized by a centralized monarchy where the king held ultimate authority, often supported by a council of ministers known as the Mantriparishad. These ministers, or Mantris, handled various administrative tasks, including revenue collection. The empire was divided into provinces, each governed by viceroys or provincial governors responsible for maintaining order and implementing imperial policies. Higher officials, often called Mahamatras or Amatyas, held multiple important government roles and were frequently recruited from the Brahmana class, wielding considerable authority. At the local level, the village (Grama) was the basic administrative unit, headed by local chiefs called Gramikas. Under the Mauryas, a highly organized bureaucracy was established, guided by the principles of the Arthashastra, which provided detailed instructions on managing revenue, trade, and other resources. This sophisticated administrative structure, with its clear hierarchy and defined roles, ensured efficient governance and revenue collection across the vast empire.

<https://vaishali.nic.in/culture-heritage/>

Magadh villages

Life in the Villages of the Magadh Empire: A Social, Economic, and Political Analysis

The Magadh Empire, flourishing in the fertile plains of what is now Bihar, rose to prominence as one of the most significant Mahajanapadas (great kingdoms) of ancient India, particularly between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE. The understanding of daily existence within its villages is paramount, as these rural settlements constituted the fundamental social, economic, and political units of the

empire . This report endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of the social hierarchy, economic activities, and political organization that characterized village life in the Magadh Empire. It is crucial to acknowledge that the provided research material primarily pertains to the Vijayanagara Empire, which existed much later in South India. Therefore, while this analysis will incorporate available information specific to the Magadh Empire, it will also draw upon broader trends and insights from ancient Indian history, with these inferences being explicitly noted where direct data is limited.

Social Structure in Magadh Villages

The social structure of Magadh villages was largely defined by the Varna system, a hierarchical framework that profoundly influenced the lives of its inhabitants . This system, which had its origins in the Vedic period , categorized society into four primary classes: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and agriculturalists), and Shudras (laborers and artisans) . Within Magadh villages, this structure dictated social standing, occupational choices, and the nature of interactions between different groups . While typical villages comprised people from various castes, the social roles and expectations were likely aligned with the traditional Varna framework . Furthermore, distinctions within the Shudra Varna, such as Nirvasita (living within the community) and Anirvasita (living outside) Shudras , suggest a nuanced social stratification extending beyond a simple four-tiered model, potentially influencing access to resources and community inclusion. The mention of "detested peoples" such as the Angas, Gandharis, and Mujavats hints at a social landscape that extended beyond the Varna system, encompassing groups who may have faced marginalization or social exclusion within or around Magadha's rural settlements.

Patañjali. (n.d.). *Mahābhāṣya*. (K. V. Abhyankar, Ed.). Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Family and kinship formed the bedrock of social life in Magadh villages . Strong kinship ties fostered social cohesion, providing essential mutual support networks and a framework for inheritance and social obligations . Extended and patrilineal families, referred to as Kula , were common, shaping household dynamics and the broader organization of the village community . The profound significance of these familial bonds is underscored by instances where even monastic norms were adapted to allow monks to maintain their kinship ties , illustrating the deeply ingrained nature of family in the social and cultural fabric of the Magadh region.

The role and status of women in Magadh villages were generally subordinate within the prevailing patriarchal social structure . Similar to the conditions observed in later periods , women's roles were likely primarily confined to the domestic sphere and familial responsibilities . The endogamous nature of the caste system further influenced their status, potentially limiting their opportunities and social mobility within the village society .

Despite the social hierarchy imposed by the Varna system, interactions between different castes and communities likely occurred within Magadh villages . Religious and cultural festivals, which were significant aspects of ancient Indian life , would have provided crucial opportunities for community gatherings and interactions, especially given the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the Magadh region . The characterization of the Magadha people as "realistic and worldly" suggests a pragmatic approach to life, potentially fostering community cooperation and a focus on collective well-being within the villages.

Economic Activities in Magadh Villages

Agriculture formed the economic backbone of Magadh villages, with the fertile land of the Gangetic plains supporting a thriving agricultural sector . The primary crops cultivated included rice, barley, pulses, millets, cotton, and sugarcane . Advanced agricultural practices such as paddy transplantation and the adoption of the iron ploughshare significantly increased agricultural yields , contributing to the region's economic prosperity . The presence of different classes of landowners, namely Grihapatis (rich landlords) and Kassakas/Krishakas (smaller landowners) , indicates a degree of economic stratification within the village's agricultural community.

Eggeling, J. (Trans.). (1882–1900). *The Satapatha Brahmana, according to the text of the Madhyandina school*. Clarendon Press.

Kautilya. (4th century BCE). *Arthashastra* (R. Shamasastri, Trans.). Bangalore Government Press. (Original work published ca. 4th century BCE)

Efficient water management through irrigation was crucial for the success of agriculture in Magadh villages . Traditional irrigation systems like Ahars (earthen storage structures) and Pynes (diversion channels) were likely employed to leverage the water resources of the region's rivers . These systems, dating back to the Mauryan era, diverted floodwaters for storage and irrigation . Rulers also played a role in developing and maintaining irrigation infrastructure, such as canals , demonstrating a state-supported effort to enhance agricultural productivity .

Local trade and exchange were integral to the village economy. Market towns (Nigama) served as hubs for the exchange of goods between villages and towns . Villages primarily supplied agricultural produce, while towns provided crafts, tools, and other manufactured goods . Established trade routes facilitated this exchange, connecting villages to broader economic networks .

Craft specialization was another important aspect of the Magadh economy. Some villages specialized in particular crafts, such as carpentry, reed making, and salt making . Artisans were often organized into guilds and resided in designated areas within towns . Their skills were valued, and they sometimes had obligations to the ruler, such as providing a day's labor per month , highlighting the significance of craft production to the state.

Taxation played a key role in the economic life of Magadh villages . The primary form of tax was a share of the agricultural produce, with peasants typically paying one-sixth of their output as Bali . The collection of taxes was carried out by royal agents, who were often assisted by the village headmen, indicating a collaborative effort between the central authority and local leadership in revenue extraction . Warriors (Kshatriya) and priests (Brahmana) were generally exempt from paying these taxes . Taxes were paid in both cash and kind .

Village-Level Administration and Governance

Magadh villages possessed a degree of self-governance through village assemblies, which were led by local chiefs known as Gramakas, Gramini, or Gramabhojaka . These assemblies likely played a crucial role in managing local affairs and making decisions relevant to the village community . Executive, judicial, and military functions were often separated at the village level .

The village headman (Gramini/Gramabhojaka) was a pivotal figure responsible for maintaining law and order within the village and collecting taxes on behalf of the central government . Their responsibilities likely extended to overseeing various aspects of village administration and mediating disputes among the villagers .

The relationship between the village administration and the central Magadhan government was characterized by a system where the central authority relied on village headmen for the efficient collection of revenue . Royal agents often worked in conjunction with village headmen in this process, indicating a level of integration between local and imperial administration in matters of finance .

Maintaining law and order at the village level was a primary responsibility of the village headman . The separation of executive, judicial, and military functions at the village level suggests a structured approach to ensuring peace and security within the community, potentially involving different segments of the village assembly in these roles.

Thapar, R. (2002). *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. University of California Press.

vijayanagara

1. Introduction

The Vijayanagara Empire, which flourished from 1336 to 1646 AD, stands as a significant epoch in the history of South India . Founded by Harihara I and Bukka Raya I, the empire emerged as a bastion of Hindu culture and resistance against the expanding Islamic sultanates of the north . With its capital initially located in Hampi, also known as Vijayanagara, the empire grew into a major political and economic power, leaving behind a rich legacy of art, architecture, and administrative innovation. Understanding the multifaceted life within the Vijayanagara Empire necessitates a close examination of both its vibrant capital city and the agrarian communities that formed its hinterland. This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the social, economic, and political life in Vijayanagara city and its surrounding villages, offering a holistic perspective on the empire's functioning and societal structure. The long duration of the empire, spanning over three centuries, and its strategic location in a region marked by dynamic political interactions, suggest a complex interplay of factors that contributed to its sustenance and resilience. Examining the differences and connections between urban and rural life will illuminate the empire's internal dynamics and the relationship between the center of power and its periphery. Ultimately, a thorough understanding of both the city and its villages is crucial for a complete appreciation of the Vijayanagara Empire's societal framework and its enduring impact on South Indian history.

2. Social Fabric of Vijayanagara

2.1 The Cosmopolitan City

Vijayanagara city presented a vibrant and diverse social landscape, deeply rooted in Hindu traditions yet characterized by an openness to various religious and cultural influences . Its population comprised a rich tapestry of individuals, including Brahmins, who held a privileged status, along with merchants (primarily Vaishyas), skilled artisans (largely from the Shudra varna but also organized into influential guilds), soldiers (including Kshatriyas and individuals from other castes), and a significant presence of foreign traders hailing from Persia, China, and the Middle East . This cosmopolitan nature was fostered by the empire's active engagement in trade and its strategic geographical location, which attracted people from diverse regions, creating a melting pot of cultures and ideas . While Hindu customs predominated, the rulers generally adopted a policy of religious tolerance, allowing Muslim communities representation and employment within the administration .

At the heart of Vijayanagara's urban life were its grand temples, most notably the Virupaksha and Vitthala temples, both now recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These temples were not merely religious edifices; they played a pivotal role in shaping the city's character, serving as significant cultural and potentially economic and social hubs. The Virupaksha temple, with origins tracing back to the 7th century, evolved into a magnificent complex under royal patronage. Inscriptions about the Virupaksha temple date back to the ninth and tenth centuries. It started as a small shrine and later developed into a huge complex during the Vijayanagara rule. The temple is dedicated to Lord Virupaksha, a form of Lord Shiva, and his consort Pampadevi. The main tower of this magnificent temple, built in the fifteenth century, has nine stories and stands 50 meters tall. Similarly, the 15th-century Vitthala Temple stood as a testament to the empire's architectural prowess, renowned for its intricate stone structures and the famed musical pillars. It is considered one of the largest and most famous structures in Hampi and is dedicated to Lord Vitthala, an avatar of Lord Vishnu. The temple was designed as a celestial palace on earth and involved skilled architects, engineers, and craftsmen in its construction. These temple centers often grew into trading towns, and their large complexes housed diverse social groups, thereby stimulating economic exchange within the city. Royal patronage ensured the grandeur and prominence of these religious institutions, which in turn influenced urban identity, facilitated social gatherings during festivals, and supported a multitude of artisans and craftspeople.

The social structure of Vijayanagara was largely defined by the Hindu caste system, a hierarchical division of society into four primary varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. This system, with its inherent hierarchy and community representation for each varna, was a dominant feature of urban social life, as noted by Allasani Peddanna in his work *Manucharitam*. Brahmins occupied the apex of this social pyramid, enjoying considerable respect as scholars, writers of literature, and religious teachers. Their roles extended beyond religious duties, with some Brahmins also serving as soldiers and administrators, wielding significant influence, particularly within the royal court and religious institutions. Notably, they were often granted exemptions from taxation, further solidifying their privileged status. Below them were the Kshatriyas, who, along with the ruling elite, held control over military and governance matters. Interestingly, the empire exhibited a degree of social mobility, especially within the military ranks, where individuals from various castes, such as Kuruba, Nayaka, and Bedas, could ascend to high positions based on their merit and abilities. The Vaishyas formed the mercantile class, actively engaged in trade and commerce, playing an essential role in the city's economy. Their extensive networks facilitated the flow of goods and contributed significantly to Vijayanagara's wealth. Finally, the Shudras constituted a large segment of the urban population, primarily involved in labor, agriculture, and a variety of other occupations. While often regarded as inferior within the social hierarchy, their labor was indispensable for the city's functioning, supporting its infrastructure, crafts, and various services. Some Shudras, however, also held high positions, with rulers and generals sometimes being from this varna.

Valuable insights into Vijayanagara's social customs, festivals, and governance are provided by accounts of foreign travelers like Domingo Paes and Abdur Razzaq. Paes, a Portuguese traveler, documented the empire's prosperity, advanced irrigation systems, impressive architecture, and bustling seaports. He noted the abundance of provisions in the city's markets and the heavy traffic of oxen laden with goods. Paes was also struck by the respect shown to women in Vijayanagara society and their active participation in economic and social life. Abdur Razzaq, a Persian diplomat, was very impressed by Vijayanagar's 'enormous magnitude and population' and its seven concentric walled fortifications of stone. He described the broad and long bazaars, where flower sellers had tall platforms and jewelers sold pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds openly. Razzaq also noted that nobles and commoners alike adorned themselves with pearls and jewels. Nicolo Dei Conti, another

foreign traveler, mentioned the celebration of weddings with singing, feasting, and music . He also described festivals with numerous oil lamps lit in and around temples and the practice of sprinkling passers-by with saffron water .

Women in Vijayanagara's urban society occupied varied roles, with some holding prominent positions and participating in political, social, and literary spheres . They were actively involved in trade and temple-related activities, including the flourishing Devadasi system, where temple dancing girls held a respectable position . Many women also found employment in royal palaces as dancers, servants, palanquin bearers, and even wrestlers, as noted by Domingo Paes . Some women were learned, with figures like Gangadevi, wife of Kumarakampana, authoring the famous work *Madhuravijayam* . However, their social standing was not uniform and likely varied based on their social strata . Practices such as Sati (self-immolation of widows), polygamy, and the dowry system were prevalent customs, as mentioned by foreign travelers like Nicolo Dei Conti . These diverse roles and customs suggest a complex social fabric where women, while contributing to various aspects of urban life, also navigated prevailing societal norms and expectations.

2.2 The Agrarian Village

In contrast to the bustling cosmopolitan life of Vijayanagara city, the surrounding villages presented a primarily agrarian society, deeply rooted in a rigid caste hierarchy that significantly influenced social roles and responsibilities. Agriculture formed the very foundation of rural existence, and the social structure was largely organized around agricultural practices and traditional customs .

Brahmins held a position of considerable authority in these village communities, particularly in those centered around temples . They played a vital role in overseeing religious rituals and were often involved in educational activities within the villages . The empire actively encouraged land grants known as *brahmadeya* to Brahmins, which further solidified their position and influence in rural society. These land grants often led to the development of temple-centered economies, where religious institutions played a crucial role in managing agricultural resources and facilitating the redistribution of surplus wealth ¹.

The temple served as the central focal point in village life, extending its influence beyond religious worship . It functioned as a vital hub for economic transactions, a place for social gatherings, and the organizing center for various festivals. This multifaceted role of the temple reinforced the communal identity of the villagers and played a significant part in the distribution of resources within the community.

Traditional customs and cultural expressions were integral to shaping the rhythm of village life. Folk traditions, encompassing music, dance, and storytelling, were central to community interactions, providing entertainment and serving as a means for preserving oral history and transmitting cultural values across generations.

Artisans and laborers in the villages often organized themselves into guilds, known as *Srenis* . These guilds played a crucial role in ensuring the economic security of their members by regulating wages and protecting their trade interests. This form of organization provided a framework for cooperation and mutual support among the craftspeople within the rural economy.

Women in the villages actively participated in the economic activities, primarily through agricultural labor, weaving, and various domestic crafts . Their contributions were essential to the rural economy. However, compared to their urban counterparts, their social mobility remained limited

due to prevailing societal norms and traditional expectations, which often confined their roles largely to the domestic and agricultural spheres.

3. Economic Landscape of Vijayanagara

3.1 Prosperity and Trade in the City

The Vijayanagara Empire was widely recognized as one of the wealthiest states of its time, a fact corroborated by the accounts of numerous foreign travelers who visited the empire during the 15th and 16th centuries. These accounts often speak of the empire's splendor and the affluence of its capital city. The primary unit of currency in gold was the *varaha*, also known as the pagoda, which weighed approximately 3.4 grams. The *varaha* frequently featured the image of Varaha, the boar incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, highlighting the empire's religious identity. Other symbols on the coins included Hanuman, Garuda, Venkatesh, Balkrishna, Uma Maheswara, Lakshmi Narayana, Saraswati-Brahma, Nandhi, Sita Rama, tiger, lion, and the mythical double-headed eagle Gandabherunda. Harihara I and Bukka I used the Hanuman symbol. Krishna Deva Raya's coins had figures of Venkatesh and Balkrishna⁴³. Achyuta Raya used Garuda and the Gandaberunda. Tirumala maintained the original Varaha and also depicted Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita.

The *varaha* was further divided into smaller denominations, including the *perta*, which was equivalent to half a *varaha*, and the *fanam*, which constituted one-tenth of a *perta*. The *fanam* was a small gold coin. The *tar* was a silver coin, valued at one-sixteenth of a *pana* or *varaha*. The *jittal* was a copper coin, worth one-third of a *tar*. An early 15th-century Ilkhanid ambassador reported the use of gold alloy, pure silver, and copper *jital* in Vijayanagara.

The Vijayanagara Empire engaged in extensive trade, with a wide range of goods being exchanged both domestically and internationally. The chief exports included cotton, silk, spices (especially black pepper, turmeric, cardamom, and ginger), rice (both black and white varieties), saltpeter, and sugar. The empire also exported iron, sandalwood, teak, pepper, cloves, and cotton textiles. Diamonds were also a significant export. The main imports consisted of horses (primarily from Persia and Arabia), pearls, copper, and coral. Other imports encompassed elephants (from Ceylon), ivory, silk, mercury, China silks and velvets, artillery, cannons, and saltpeter.

The development of shipbuilding played a crucial role in facilitating both coastal and overseas trade, with the empire reportedly possessing around 300 seaports. Ships were the primary mode of transport for these trades. The Malabar coast, with its important port of Cannanore, served as the most important commercial hub on the West coast. Other notable ports included Mangalore, Barkur, Bhatkal, Honavar, Calicut, Cochin, and Pulicat. Vijayanagara established extensive commercial ties with various regions, including the islands of the Indian Ocean, Burma, the Malay Archipelago, and China in the East, and Arabia, Persia, South Africa, Abyssinia, and Portugal on the West. This vast network of trade relationships underscores the empire's significant position in the global economic landscape of the period.

3.2 Agriculture and Local Economy in Villages

Agriculture was the bedrock of the village economy within the Vijayanagara Empire, with the majority of the rural population engaged in cultivation. The primary crops grown included rice (both black and white varieties), which served as the staple food, along with millets such as jowar and ragi, and cotton. Farmers also cultivated sugarcane, pulses, various spices like black pepper, turmeric, cardamom, and ginger, as well as betel leaves, areca nuts, and coconuts. The land was divided into irrigated (*neerambhika*) and rain-fed (*kadambara*) types.

The agricultural prosperity of the region was largely attributed to well-developed irrigation systems, encompassing reservoirs, tanks, and canals . Investments in these irrigation projects were made by various stakeholders, including kings, governors, wealthy merchants, peasants, and temple caretakers ⁵³. The empire actively promoted land grants, known as *brahmadeya*, to Brahmins and temples . These grants fostered the development of temple-centered economies, where religious institutions played a significant role in managing agricultural resources and redistributing surplus wealth ¹.

Trade within the villages was primarily localized, with weekly markets functioning as key commercial centers where farmers and artisans engaged in the exchange of goods . The rural economy was dynamic, with barter systems operating alongside transactions involving currency ¹. Artisans residing in the villages were skilled in various crafts, including textile production, metalwork, and pottery, catering to the needs of both local and regional markets . These industries were often regulated by guilds. The state imposed taxes on the agricultural produce, which formed a substantial portion of the empire's revenue, providing the necessary funds for its administrative and military operations . The rate of taxation on agricultural produce varied depending on factors such as the type of crop, the quality of the soil, and the method of irrigation employed . Besides land tax, there were also professional taxes on shopkeepers, farm-servants, shepherds, washermen, potters, shoemakers, and musicians .

4. Political Order and Governance

4.1 Central Authority in the City

The political framework of the Vijayanagara Empire was characterized by a highly organized structure, with the king holding the supreme position of authority . The king was the central figure in the administrative machinery, wielding ultimate power in civil, military, and judicial matters . He was assisted by a council of ministers, known as the *Mantriparisad*, who provided counsel on administrative affairs . The *Maha Pradhana*, or chief minister, held the most prominent position within this council . The empire was also governed through regional governors, often referred to as Nayakas or Mandaleshwara, who oversaw various territories .

The capital city of Vijayanagara was heavily fortified, featuring imposing walls, with Abdur Razzaq mentioning seven concentric rings of ramparts, and strategically located watchtowers . These fortifications underscored the city's importance as a major political and military stronghold ⁴. The empire maintained a formidable army, which included well-trained cavalry, often relying on the import of horses from Persia and Arabia, along with war elephants and skilled archers . Military commanders within the empire were known as Nayakas or Poligars .

The administrative system of Vijayanagara operated through a decentralized framework, with provincial governors, also known as Nayakas, administering different regions while maintaining allegiance to the central authority . This system, known as the Amara-Nayaka system, involved the granting of land (Amaram) to these military chiefs in exchange for their military service and the payment of an annual tribute to the king . Furthermore, Vijayanagara engaged in diplomatic relations with foreign powers, most notably with the Portuguese, which facilitated trade partnerships and secured military alliances, contributing to the empire's stability and economic prosperity .

4.2 Local Administration in Villages

The administration of villages within the Vijayanagara Empire was largely semi-autonomous, with local governance primarily managed by councils such as the *nadu* at the district level and the *grama sabhas* at the village level . These councils played a vital role in maintaining order within their jurisdictions by resolving local disputes, managing land records, and overseeing the collection of taxes. The *nadu* was a territorial division higher than a village, and the *grama* was the smallest administrative unit . However, the central authority of the empire remained supreme, with the king as the ultimate court of justice . Vijayanagara rulers appointed officials, such as the *Mahanayakacharya*, to supervise revenue collection and ensure the enforcement of laws, thereby integrating the villages into the broader administrative framework of the empire .

While subject to royal authority, villages enjoyed a significant degree of self-governance, allowing local institutions to function with considerable independence . Village headmen, known by various titles such as Gowda, Reddi, and Maniyam, led the village panchayats and managed local affairs with the assistance of village accountants (Karnam, Senabhova) and watchmen (Talaiyari) . The Ayagar system, prevalent in village administration, involved a collective of twelve functionaries who were responsible for conducting various village affairs . These village servants were paid by grants of land or a portion of agricultural produce . The rulers of Vijayanagara took active measures to promote rural prosperity while maintaining strict political oversight. They implemented measures to encourage agriculture through the development of irrigation projects and the granting of land. To safeguard villages from external threats and internal conflicts, military outposts were strategically positioned, providing protection against potential raids and ensuring stability across the empire .

5. Conclusion

The Vijayanagara Empire presented a complex and vibrant society, characterized by distinct yet interconnected urban and rural spheres. Vijayanagara city stood as a cosmopolitan hub, a center of political power, thriving trade, and rich cultural exchange, marked by a diverse population and grand religious institutions. In contrast, the surrounding villages exhibited a primarily agrarian character, with a more rigid social hierarchy and a semi-autonomous system of local governance centered around agriculture and traditional customs. The economic landscape reflected this duality, with the city flourishing through extensive international trade and a sophisticated monetary system, while the villages formed the agricultural backbone, sustaining the empire through their produce and local crafts. Politically, the empire maintained a centralized authority in the city, balanced by a degree of local autonomy in the villages, ensuring both stability and the efficient administration of its vast territories. The hierarchical yet functional relationship between the city and its villages was crucial to the overall strength and longevity of the Vijayanagara Empire. The empire's lasting impact on South Indian history is undeniable, leaving behind a legacy of architectural marvels, significant literary contributions, and enduring social and administrative traditions that continue to resonate today.