



E-ISSN: 2706-9117

P-ISSN: 2706-9109

www.historyjournal.net

IJH 2024; 6(2): 250-254

Received: 16-08-2024

Accepted: 24-09-2024

Naincy RanaHistorical Studies, School of
Social Sciences, Jawaharlal
Nehru University, New Delhi,
Delhi, India

Perceptions of urbanity, urbanization and town life in medieval India: Insights from Banarasidas's *Ardhakathanak*

Naincy RanaDOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2024.v6.i2d.319>**Abstract**

This paper examines the perceptions of urbanity, urbanization, and town life in medieval and early modern India, focusing on *Ardhakathanak* (a half story), a 17th-century autobiographical account of a trader named Banarasidas. The study delves into the urbanization processes during the Mughal period, exploring how cities, towns, and *qasbas* functioned as economic, social, and cultural centers. By analyzing *Ardhakathanak*, this paper seeks to understand the lived experiences of urban dwellers, particularly traders, and how they navigated the complexities of urban life, trade networks, and their interactions with Mughal authorities. Thus, Banarasidas' narrative, therefore, offers a rare bottom-up perspective on urban life during the Mughal period.

Keywords: Medieval India, Mughal empire, Urbanization, town life, *Ardhakathanak*, Banarasidas**Introduction**

Abul Fazl quoted, "People who are connected to the world will gather in towns because without it there would be no advancement," in his *Ain-I Akbari* ^[1]. Clearly indicating the significance and cosmopolitan character of medieval towns as convergence hubs, a centre where life hummed with people from many regions, and where pleasure could be obtained. The phrases *Qasba*, *Balda*, *Shahr*, and *Bandar* were used by the Mughals to refer to different types of towns, metropolitan areas, and port towns.

During the Sultanate era, *Qasbas* started to develop as a rural town. But the Mughals gave it a significant push. The increasingly monetised economy and active commercialization gave *qasbas* a boost in terms of growth. Urban need for food and raw resources, as well as the extraction of tax surplus in cash, stimulated trade ^[2]. A *qasba*, and city have strong ties to one another, according to Satish Chandra ^[3]. He stresses that *qasbas* were "a crucial component in the development of agricultural productivity and the growth of the money economy ^[4]." The village's elites, including the landowners, Brahmans, and holders of *sasan* (revenue-free grants), lived here. He emphasises that these "little towns" developed into centres for handicrafts in addition to serving as markets and places to sell agricultural produce. Specialized towns like Bayana and Khairabad grew as urban craft production increased. The traders of the *qasba* would directly purchase produce from producers for later sale in cities like Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, etc. ^[5] Banarasi Das in his autobiography also states that he bought clothes from Khairabad to sell in Agra city ^[6]. For long-distance trade, *caravansarais* (inns) played a significant role in the cityscape by providing the stay of passengers and tradesmen. These *sarais* were fort-like stone buildings having bastions and walled enclosures with enormous gates. They had private wells and separate quarters for their livestock and bullock carriages. Many times in Banarasi Das's book, *sarais* are referred to as resting spaces ^[7].

When it comes to cities in northern India, four types of urban centers can be identified ^[8]. The first were the cities whose primary duty was administration, with any religious or economic functions serving as a supplementary function. This group includes cities like Delhi, Lahore, Agra, and Fatehpur Sikri. The second kind of cities are those that are largely productive and commercial in nature. Examples of such economically advanced cities from the Mughal Empire are Ahmedabad and Patna.

Corresponding Author:**Naincy Rana**Historical Studies, School of
Social Sciences, Jawaharlal
Nehru University, New Delhi,
Delhi, India

Thirdly, there were cities that were thriving because of their primary position as pilgrimage centres. For example Banaras and Mathura, here trade and crafting activities were drawn because there existed a concentration of permanent and temporary settlers. These cities had a sacral significance which complemented or transcended their economic or political importance. Then there were the centres that grew and thrived because of some unique fabrication technique, artisanal skill, or locally produced good that guaranteed their continued prosperity. Because of the indigo that was farmed in the nearby area, Bayana was able to flourish. Whereas Awadh, Khairabad and Daryabad were well known for their textiles. Under the Mughals, as under earlier regimes, but now with a greater degree of intensity, the cities and towns of the subcontinent fulfilled diverse and overlapping roles.

To understand urbanism and its various aspects we have a lot of different sources. However, Banarasi Das, a merchant who lived during reign of Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan gives us an ample amount of information regarding urbanity of medieval India from a perspective of a common man, in his autobiography '*Ardhakathanak*'. He resided in urban north India, primarily in Jaunpur and Agra. Despite the fact that Banarasi is the creator of other renowned works on Jainism, the *Ardhakathanak* stands out because it is arguably the "first autobiographical account in the Indian tradition." As the late-medieval - early-modern confluence was excellently captured by this North Indian Jaina trader in the seventeenth century, my objective in this paper is to analyze perceptions of urbanity, urbanisation, and town life in India during the Mughal era. A commoner's perspective on the Mughal Era can be found in Banarasi's narrative of his life. The political events taking place in the Empire didn't concern him. As a subaltern source, *Ardhakathanak* is one of the few sources that allows us to reconstruct history from the bottom-up rather than the usual top-down approach.

Upon reading his autobiography one can observe various aspects of urbanism, urbanization and urban – rural lifestyle. For instance, *Ardhakathanak* tells us about observance of religious practices and cultural life, values/ life style of locals and daily life of towns, professional mobility, life of traders, business practices and social relations, geographical mobility and urban life of cities, innumerable occupational sectors, education, relation with Mughal authorities, marriage, mortality and women etc. I have made an attempt to provide gist of the above-mentioned features and some of these overlapping features are combined together.

1. Life of traders

Banarasidas was born in Jaunpur in 1586 into a wealthy family of merchants. His ancestors belonged to the *Shrimal* clan of Rajputs, who after receiving the mantra from a guru converted to Jainism and abandoned their unusual and hostile ways. Jain immigration from Rajasthan began during Akbar's reign. Mewar was the sole state that had turned down the Mughals' offer of friendship; however Jahangir made peace with it. The Jains were now able to travel freely across the Mughal empire. This migration pattern persisted throughout Aurangzeb's rule. Merchant immigration was sparked by an overall vigour in trading activity. Now, the merchant had larger penetration into the rural areas^[9].

Trade and commerce flourished throughout the Mughal era

because of the considerable stability and peace of the regime. Banarasidas cited examples of numerous wealthy merchants who controlled trade over vast stretches of the continent through a wide dealer network and agents. They traded in goods including indigo, oil, grain, and valuable stones as well as cloth and fabrics. Prior to the development of contemporary banking systems, moneylending was a profitable supplement to trade and a crucial source of finance. Lesser merchants made a decent income through commerce despite having relatively constrained scopes of business and a lesser variety of goods. The Banarasi family was a wealthy, mighty, and prestigious Jain community. It gave its members a social and religious framework within which to live, as well as chances for commerce and business.

He also discusses the educational requirements for various classes. He attended a *pathshala* that was run by a *brahmin pandit*. Merchants learned how to analyse gold and silver at school and distinguish genuine coins from fakes. Additionally, they learned how to properly record debits and credits as well as maintain precise documentation. Later, like their fathers and grandfather had done before them, the lads of the business sector were made to sit in the bazaar and learn the principles of trade and commerce. This level of expertise was seen as sufficient for merchants. However, those traders who loved study were made fun of by people who said that learning was just for *brahmans* and monks and also that people who devoted their entire lives to learning went hungry. This demonstrates the duties and demands imposed on various castes and classes. This was also made clear when Banarasi threw his manuscript away and his father rejoiced inside.

Banarasi also described many trade-related concerns, such as ongoing ups and downs in revenues and losses, as well as cases of robberies that were frequent among travelling merchants.

2. Business practices and social relations

There are few instances that reflects the business practices of merchant community. One such instance is related to 'partnership in business. He talks about his father's business partnerships and alongside claims that he himself went into partnership with Dharamdas. While talking about Dharamdas, Banarasidas reveals few negative points about his personality but he also claims that he agreed to be his business partner because of his reputation which shows that in trading occupation, reputation is more important than any other thing. Banarasidas did not give any clarification to this but one can assume that people generally prefer to buy expensive goods from well established and reputed sellers to avoid any kind of fraud. He also talks about Narottamdas who first became his Business partner and then a good friend and hence partnership was meant to establish not only trade but also good social relations. Regarding social relations, Banarasidas gave a lot of information. He tells how it was a very common thing for people to move in their occupational circles. Number of times it was mentioned that another trader helped them and provided shelter in their house. For instance, Karamchand Mahur, a *bania*, vacated his house for the use of Kharagsen. Regarding Mahur, Banarasidas wrote that he said to his father "You are the master, I am your slave. Please come with me. I am there to serve you^[10]." These might be exaggerated lines that author wrote and from my perspective it shows the hierarchy

among merchants. Reasons could be many, may be Mahur wanted to help Kharagsen as he was also from trading community or may be he helped him to give his own business a boost. He might want to establish good relations with Kharagsen as he was a wealthy merchant and a business partnership or friendship with him could be beneficial for Mahur. Banarasidas also gave information about buying things on credit when he tells about his and *kachauriwala's* relation. However it was visible that buying things on credit was not a thing for small sellers like *kachauriwala* but he did that for his social relations with Banarasidas.

We uncover another situation where fulfilling a social commitment was necessary. Kharagsen formed a partnership with Sundardas but when he and his wife passed away.

Kharagsen took it upon himself to arrange his daughter's wedding in a lavish manner. This may have been done as a gesture of appreciation for Sundardas' role as a paternal figure.

3. Professional mobility

Banarasidas claimed that his grandfather Muldas Biholia, who was living a *bania* lifestyle, travelled for Malwa and took a job as a steward for a Mughal officer. He also talks about Rai Dhanna, a *Shrimal* from the *Singhad Gotra* who was a Diwan in Bengal under the Pathan Suleman Sultan. All 500 Shrimals who worked for him had been transformed into *potdars* (revenue collectors). One of these men, Kharagsen, the father of Banarasi, gained considerable wealth. For centuries in northern India scribes and accountants were Indians belonging to the three castes: *Kayasths* (clerks), *Khatris* (traders), and *Brahmans* (scholars and teachers). Even after the establishment of Muslim rule there was no change in the social composition of the secretarial class, since very few senior state officials, who were mostly Turks, Afghans, Iranians, or Central Asians, were familiar with the *Hindwi* language and script. As traders were skilled at handling finances and maintaining records. They were given the opportunity to get into the lower bureaucracy^[11].

4. Innumerable occupational sectors

Foreign visitors to India in the 16th and 17th centuries paint an image of a small segment of the ruling elite leading a life of tremendous extravagance and luxury in stark contrast to the plight of the majority, which included peasants, artisans, and domestic servants. Indigenous sources also generally focus on the opulent lifestyle of the upper classes while sometimes mentioning the plight of the common people.¹² Banarasidas, the author, primarily discusses the mercantile class. Notably, Abul Fazl defined the merchants and master artisans in his four-tiered division of society, placing them above the religious and academic classes but below the aristocrats.¹³ Other than merchants Banarasi tells about a wide variety of service professions, among which are the following: glassmakers, tailors, betel-leaf sellers, dyers, milkmen, carpenters, stonecutters, oil-press workers and oil sellers, washermen, cotton carders, confectioners, water carriers and palanquin bearers, vegetable growers and vegetable sellers, wine sellers, potters, sellers of flowers and flower garlands, fullers, paper-makers, farmers, weavers. He identified these professions as belonging to 36 lower classes, or *paunis*.¹⁴ Along with this, he also make mention

of professional class of doctors and Brahmin teachers. He relates how, when his father became ill in 1616, a doctor from Banaras treated him, and how, during the plague epidemic, even doctors were dying. During his childhood, he received a year's worth of care from a doctor from Jaunpur. He also make mention of a robber settlement and *Chaudhari* (chief) of robbers. His account of spending a night in robber village as a Brahmin suggests that robbers had their own rules and ethics too and they were not used to steal from *brahmins* which is clear from the following sentences that *chaudhari* said : ' You are gods, I am your devotee. Come, stay in my chaupal. God is there between us, I will not harm you^[15]. However Banarasi account does not give any detail about these occupational sectors and their socio-economic conditions.

5. Relation with the ruler and Mughal authorities

We get a glimpse of the common man's perspective via *Ardhakathanak* and through his eyes we can also infer image of ruler and what kind of stability was there in empire during his time. The domestic and social instability that followed the demise of the emperor Akbar in Agra is described by Banarasi. He talks about how he became unconscious when he heard about emperor's demise and hurt himself. He also discussed the enormous social uneasiness that results from the abrupt absence of an emperor, who serves as the fundamental foundation of the state. Rich people started dressing like paupers, shopkeepers closed their shops leaving the marketplace vacant, and ordinary folks locked themselves in their homes out of fear of what might happen rather than any apparent acts of crime or disorder. By highlighting these elements, Banarasi is able to convey to us the general fear of the upheaval that frequently followed imperial succession disputes. However Banarasi was not a person who was much involved in politics affairs. Above-mentioned instances were described by him as a commoner only who was much concerned about life and peace of his own family and town and not the ruler and his fort. Author also gave description about relationship of general population with Mughal authorities such as governor, *kotwal*, *hakim* and *diwan*. Regarding relationship with governor of Jaunpur and merchants community, he wrote that the city's governor was Nawab Qilich. All of the jewellers were detained and imprisoned by him. Additionally, he wanted a substantial sum of money from them, which the jewellers lacked. As if they were robbers, he used to line them up and beat them with prickly whips until they were nearly dead. Local in nature, the emperor did not support or approve these persecutions. But Banarasi made no mention of his opinions regarding the governor's callous move, so all we can do at this point is speculate as to why. I suppose Banarasi may have believed that criticising the political establishment could get him in trouble in the future. While telling story about counterfeit coins, Banarasi gave information about hierarchy of Mughal administration too. He tells that people would first report any cases to *Kotwal*, who would then report them to *Hakim*, who would then send his *diwan* to investigate further. These folks were helpful to the general populace, or perhaps they were helpful to Banarasi since he claimed to be a successful businessman. Additionally, Banarasi visited the homes of the *hakim*, the *diwan*, and the *kotwal* and gave each official a portion of the fragrant oil appropriate to his rank. This suggests that the Mughal officials' acceptance of gifts was a

practise that was prevalent, and that people gave them gifts in appreciation of the services they rendered.

6. Mobility and urban life of cities

In addition to having professional mobility, the professional classes frequently moved from one location to another in quest of greater prospects. Banarasidas himself moved from Jaunpur to Agra then to Khairabad, then again from Khairabad to Banaras, Jaunpur and Patna. Then from Patna he again went to Agra, in between travelling to Khairabad again. The merchant communities frequently transitioned between cities. Remarkably, he routinely transitioned between five subas. Additionally, he described the urban lifestyle in these cities. The birthplace of Banarasidas, Jaunpur, was among the cities he described in great detail. The loss of Jaunpur's status as the Sharqi sultanate's capital, according to Gavin R.G. Hambly, left the city in a stagnant state and prevented it from regaining the prosperity of the 15th century ^[16]. Banarasi, however, discusses Jaunpur's physical landscape, which includes the Gomti River and the Kolhuban Forest. He also discussed the city's architecture, mentioning temples, castles, huge homes with multiple levels, pavilions, and countless flags. In addition, he cited marketplaces, sarais, and huge *mandis* as social and commercial hubs where regular people used to mingle. Furthermore, he described the city's inhabitants, who belonged to all four castes, including the thirty-six *shudra* subcastes, *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, and *vaishya*. This demonstrates that the city was a setting of considerable cultural diversity where Muslims served as the rulers and a diverse range of people as the subjects. As it can be observed from Banarasidas' account, Jaunpur was still prospering, if perhaps not to the same extent as it had in the fifteenth century, but it was nevertheless not at a standstill. Author detailed the state of city and its inhabitants when there was a possibility of war. Prince Salim apparently went hunting in the Kolhuban forest in Jaunpur in the year 1600. Salim's uprising and rebellion were feared by Akbar, who instructed the governor of Jaunpur to revert back to Salim. The governor turned Jaunpur into a fort by closing all bridges and city entrances, blocking all routes leading to and from the city, forbidding boats from stopping at the *ghats* anywhere along Gomti, and prepared for tussle. This created much distress among population of city and nobody wanted to live there. As a result, the masses were unsure whether they should stay in Jaunpur or leave because of the threat of war. Many traders as a result relocated to different places. However, within a few days, the harmony was restored, and people returned. However, political instability may have a detrimental effect on the growth of urban centres, particularly if it threatened to endure for a long time or spread across a large area ^[17].

7. Observance of religious practices and cultural life, values/ life style of locals and daily life of towns

In Banarasidas's narrative, there are numerous instances of religious expression, demonstrating the importance of religion in shaping a person's identity and lifestyle. We also encounter some of the core ideas of Jain philosophy. Recurring references to pilgrimages to sacred places that were probably planned by wealthy men are discussed in detail. Additionally, we come across examples of Hindu notions like fasts, vows, and applying *Tika* (a small mark on forehead) prior to travel. The spirituality of Sati *Aut* is

another instance of the above. Prior to Banarasi's birth, Banarasidas' family paid a visit to the Sati *Aut* temple in the hopes of conceiving a son. After his birth, a similar journey was conducted to pray for Banarasi to live a long life. Hindu puranic traditions have the myth of Sati, a good wife who sacrificed herself in response to her husband Shiva's insult. This can be due to the Hinduization of Jaina Dharma or the Rajput heritage of Banarasi's family. Because his forefathers were Rajputs, that's why may be his family continued to maintain some traditions like applying *tika* and worshipping Sati. *Ardhakathanak* also represents Banaras which is usually considered as abode of Shiva as a centre for Jaina pilgrimage and despite its sacral character, was also a major manufacturing and commercial centre ^[18]. Under Muslim rule, it was normal for members of other religions to carry out their rituals without encountering any obstacles, as evidenced by the pilgrimage-related instances.

When anything positive or negative happened to Banarasi, he addressed Karma. Sufi saints also had an impact on common people during the Medieval Era. People cherished reading their writings. According to Banarasi, he used to recite *Mrigavati* and *Madhumalati* to a gathering of ten to twenty men who would come hear him. Author also discusses the fallacy of locals' beliefs, who used to execute numerous rituals blindly. He mentions *Sanyasis* and *Jogis* who used to fool the public in order to gain money. Banarasi was one of their victims and duped himself twice due to his superstitions. The unusual kind of disease treatment that Banarasidas's elders tried on him serves as another indication of the nature of life in towns. When Banarasi got sick, these people didn't go to the doctor; instead, they forced him to fast for 20 days and occasionally only gave him two *rotis* (chapati/ flatbread). Using this unconventional diet, sickness was cured. This demonstrates that common people used to employ their traditional practices in spite of the existence of numerous *Vaidhyas* and *Hakims* (traditional medical practitioners in India).

8. Marriage, mortality and women

In medieval period, it seems that marriage age was quite low. Although Akbar set the minimum marriage age for girls at 14 and for boys at 16, it appears that the law was not properly adhered to since Banarasidas got engaged when he was only eleven. Akbar also supported widow remarriage. Monogamy seems to be the norm among Hindus. However, given the high mortality rate, being married multiple times following the loss of a spouse also does not seem stigmatising. Banarasidas' wife passed away, and he later wed her sister and then another female. The death rate seems to be unusually high during this time. Famine and epidemic outbreaks were also highlighted. Eight of Banarasidas' children as well as his two brothers also died unexpectedly in infancy. In addition to that, his writing doesn't give any account of women learning however he gives hints of access of women over family wealth as he tells a scenario when his wife borrowed two hundred rupees from her mother so that he can start his business again.

Conclusion

The *Ardhakathanak* is an underutilised source of Mughal history that should be used to critically assemble our understanding of the Mughal era. The source can be utilised to counter imperial literature and records' bias and re-examine different elements of that period from the

viewpoint of the common people. But because the text was written by a merchant, it contains more details about aspects of trade. To fully comprehend the urban-rural continuum, additional factors including peasant daily life, agricultural techniques, and taxation still need to be investigated from other sources.

References

1. Unit-22 Spatial Characteristics of Mughal Cities. eGyanKosh; c2018. Available from: <http://egyankosh.ac.in/handle/123456789/44472>.
2. Raychaudhuri T, Habib I, editors. The Cambridge Economic History of India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; c1982. Chapters 14 and 15.
3. Chandra S. Some Aspects of Urbanisation in Medieval India. In: Banga I, editor. Manohar; c2005.
4. Chandra S. Qasbas in Western Rajasthan: Small Towns During the Seventeenth Century. Oxford: Oxford University Press; c2008.
5. Banārsīdās, Chowdhury R. Ardhakathanak = A Half Story. Penguin Books; c2009. p. 101.
6. Ibid. p. 47, 61, 87, 105, 120, 122, 125, 127, 165.
7. Raychaudhuri T, Habib I. Cambridge Economic History of India. p. 435.
8. Sharma M. Social Life and Cultural Practices among the Merchant Group in Mughal Gujarat. [PhD diss.]. Aligarh Muslim University; c2013.
9. Banārsīdās, Chowdhury R. Ardhakathanak = A Half Story. p. 57.
10. Haider N. Norms of Professional Excellence and Good Conduct in Accountancy Manuals of the Mughal Empire. *Int Rev Soc Hist.* 2011;56(S19):266-268.
11. Raychaudhuri T, Habib I. Cambridge Economic History of India. p. 458.
12. Ibid. p. 466.
13. Banārsīdās, Chowdhury R. Ardhakathanak = A Half Story. p. 46.
14. Ibid. p. 107.
15. Raychaudhuri T, Habib I. Cambridge Economic History of India. p. 436.
16. Ibid. p. 437-438.
17. Ibid. p. 438.
18. Banārsīdās, Chowdhury R. Ardhakathanak = A Half Story. p. 73.