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Glimpses of Pataliputra in historical texts

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Abstract

A cross evidences of archaeological and literary sources would suggest that a major portion of the present town of Patna stand almost on the ruins of an ancient city known by different names, Pataligrama, Pataliputra, Puspapura and Kusumapura. Of all these names, Pataliputra appears to have been the most popular since it is mentioned in the literary records of different periods. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya, calls it Palimbothra (Pataliputra). Patanjali, the famous grammarian of the second century B.C., calls it Pataliputra. The name Puspapura figures in the Yugapurana while in the Tattvarthasutra of Umasvati, a celebrated Jain author who lived here in the first-second centuries A.D., the place is described as Kusumapura. Fa-hien, who visited the city in the first decade of fifth century A.D., and his compatriot Hiuen-tsang who came here in the second quarter of the seventh century A. D., also knew it by the name Pataliputra.

Keywords: Patliputra, literary source, Puspapura, Kusumapura

Introduction

The area of Pataliputra has been given by Megasthenes as 80 stadia in length and 15 stadia in breadth, which works out to 9 miles and $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles, respectively. This was roughly the area of the modern Patna town before the development of the new capital area for purposes of administration. Even at present the distance between Golghar and Malsalami is 8 miles while the distance between Kumrahar and the Ganga around miles. Megasthenes refers to a 600 feet wide ditch around the city. The ditch or the moat has not been precisely identified, but the indications are that the depression which runs parallel to the railway line on the northern side might have represented it. Slowly the depression is giving way to new constructions from the western side. Another depression runs along the Gardiner Road through Mandiri Mohalla to Bans Ghat. This depression, which, in the course of construction work, yielded the typical red Sone sand, might have represented the old bed of river Sone. Thereby forming the south-western boundary of the ancient city. This seems to agree largely with Patanjali's description of the city as spread along the Sone (anusonam pataliputram). If we may add here that the depression along the railway line, which is said to represent the 600 feet wide moat mentioned by Megasthenes, was fed by Sone water, then length-wise also a large part of the city can be said to have spread, figuratively at least, along the Sone, thereby justifying Patanjali's description of Pataliputra as anu sonam instead of anu gangam. Since the moat ran from west to east Sone alone could be its natural feeder. The expression anu-sonam could also have been warranted by the possibility of Ganga flowing miles away from its present course. At present the main stream of the river is south-bound leaving several miles of its bed for cultivation between two rainy seasons. It was just the reverse in the time of Fa-shien, who had to walk five miles toward South after crossing the Ganga before he could reach Pataliputra. The situation might not have been different in the time of Patanjali also.

The history of Pataliputra goes back to the 6th century B.C., when the Magadhan king Ajatasatru decided to build a fortification here at the obscure village of Pataligrama. The task of fortification, the avowed purpose of which was conquest of the Vajjian republic of Vaisali, was entrusted to Sunidha and Vassakara, the two reputed ministers of the king. This literary traditions about the emergence Pataliputra is confirmed by archaeological excavations which show that the earliest layer of occupation does not go beyond the 6th century B.C. In the early Buddhist literature the future greatness of Pataliputra is predicted with emphasis. Much of this seems to have been interpolated into earlier works at a time when the city enjoyed legendary fame in countries far and wide. In the Patali Sutta which forms part of the Khuddaka Nikaya, the Buddha is quoted as saying that Pataliputra will emerge as a great metropolis and also that its three enemies will be flood, fire and invasion. In the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha confides to his favourite disciple, Ananda, that as far as the Aryans dwell and as far as the merchants travel, Pataliputra will be the foremost city.

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The Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, who visited Pataliputra in around 315 B.C. and spent several years as a distinguished member of the royal court of Chandragupta Maurya. He refers to the greatness of the city and points out the danger it stood on account of the monsoon rains and consequent floods. Megasthenes states that the greatest city in India is called Palimbothra, which stands at the confluence of two of the greatest rivers of India Ganges (Ganga) and Erannaboas (Hiranyavaha). Like all other Indian cities situated on the banks of rivers Pataliputra was built of wood while those situated at some distance from the sea or the rivers were built of bricks. This was done for fear of destruction by heavy rains and devastating floods.

The descriptions of Pataliputra as a city of wooden structures is partly correct. The discovery of the Maurya stone-pillared hall and the extensive ruins of brick-built monasteries of the Sunga-Kusana and Gupta periods at Kumrahar shows that stones and bricks were freely used for structural activity about the time when Megasthenes was living at the city and also afterwards. The limited excavations conducted in the heavily built-up areas of Patna City further suggest that during the Maurya and post-Maurya periods even residential buildings were made of well-fired bricks. At the same time, there is no denying the fact that wood was used most liberally for the purpose of defense and sewage. The evidence of wooden fortification walls and the covered wooden drain found at Bulandibagh would appear to confirm this. The evidence of wooden fortification walls is much more extensive, as can be seen from the discovery of wooden palisades with uprights, right from Lohanipur in Patna West through Bahadurpur, Bulandibagh down to Gandhi Sarovar in the east. Wooden palisades of the Maurya period have also come to light in the area between the Khwaja Kalan Ghat and Sadar Gali in Patna City.

In various other respects also the fragmentary descriptions of Megasthenes need modification for a fuller appreciation of the contemporary urban milieu. At one place the ambassador writes that in India there were no slaves. Megasthenes belonged to a country where the basis of economic organisation was slave-keeping. Compared to this, the slaves constitute a mere segment of the productive labour force in India, and, therefore, of little significance for a person coming from the Aegean Sea region. In his 13th major rock edicts, Ashok calls for kinder treatment to slaves and servants, who obviously performed two different kinds of labour service; the servants were mainly for domestic work while the slaves were engaged in the fields and workshops. This has been well supported by the jataka stories.

Similarly, the remark made by the Greek visitor about the habitual unchastity of women also need not be taken at its face value. The wives, he informs us, are inclined to prostitute themselves unless they are made to remain chaste. Probably, what Megasthenes states is only suggestive of a promiscuous society, a vivid picture of which is documented by the Jatakas, the degree of promiscuity being determined by the affluence and leisure commanded by different classes of people. It is, however, gratifying to learn that no dowry was involved in the settlement of marriages. Megasthenes states that as soon as a girl became marriageable she was presented before the gathering of prospective grooms. A suitor who excelled all others in wrestling, boxing, running

or in any other manly exercise was selected as the husband of the girl.

Megasthenes, in his book *Indika* gives in details about the crime situation of the city. He reports that thief's were almost unknown with the value of the stolen article not exceeding 200 drachmas on any occasion. He was highly impressed by the fact that the people left their houses unguarded. The deterrent nature of punishment may also account for the satisfactory crime situation documented by the Greek visitor. The bearing of false witness, for instance, was punished by mutilation of hands and feet. Particularly significant in this respect is the fact that injuries caused to artisans were sternly dealt with. Megasthenes states that if someone caused an artisan to lose his hands or eyes, he was put to death. This is an indication of the important position of artisanal workers in the contemporary urban milieu, which is also borne out by other literary and epigraphic records of the period. The ignoble status to which the artisans sank was a later development the symptoms of which begin to appear from the third-fourth Christian centuries when the towns began to decline, commerce became sluggish and the polarisation of the producing Vaisya-Sudra and non-producing Brahmana Ksatriya classes became more and more conflict oriented.

The Greek ambassador has a word of praise for the simplicity which marked the daily life of the citizen. The men dressed themselves with three unstitched pieces of cloth, one girdled round the waist and hanging below the knee, the second flung across the shoulders and the third twisted around the head, like a turban. The first obviously is the traditional dhoti, the second might have been a chadar still very much in use. The head dress made by twisting a plain cloth is an important item of clothing among certain communities and among the rural Indians. Megasthenes further tells us that though the people practised simple living they were careful to give themselves as attractive a look as possible. Slim and agile as they were, the citizens used shoes with high heels so that they may appear a little taller than they actually were. The members of affluent families used sun-shades when they went outdoors, the umbrella being held by an accompanying attendant. The affluent people had a taste for coloured garments artistically done with gold and precious stones. Some idea of the personal ornaments of richer citizens can be had from archaeological material discovered during excavations in Patna City and Kumrahar.

The archaeological materials prove to be of great help in corroborating and even filling up many a gap in the descriptions left by the Greek writer. The terracotta human figurines belonging to the Maurya, Sunga and Kusana periods show the manner in which well-to-do people of the town dressed themselves. Megasthenes' reference to the use of head-dress is borne out by a large number of terracotta human figurines belonging to the Sunga-Kusana period. The evidence suggests that the head-dress was worn by both men and women. But for women there were other styles also to decorate the head. In several terracotta figurines they are depicted with attractive and elaborate coiffure. Other examples show that some of the women beautified their hair with flowers and flower-like devices. The reference to the use of ornaments is also supported by the discovery of a large number of finger-rings, ear-rings, bangles, ear-lobes, necklaces and pendants. The fact that the ear-lobes were all wheel-turned and the pendants all mould-made would

suggest large-scale use of these objects by fashionable men and women of the city. Large number of beads made of different materials such as copper, glass, bone, terracotta, shell, crystals and precious stones like jasper and carnelian give further indication of the prevailing fashion-styles. A necklace of beads belonging to an early layer of occupation in the Patna City area has also been discovered. That these ornaments were actually in use is borne out by terracotta human figurines. One figurine belonging to the Sunga-Kusana period shows a standing male wearing a button like ear-ring and a fan-shaped head-dress. On another figurine a beautiful woman is shown with a cup-shaped ear-ornament. Another beauty, who is dressing herself, is depicted with a turban-like head-dress tied with a pearl-string near the right ear and a bead-necklace round her neck. The lady is holding an antimony rod in her right hand. The antimony rod, usually made of copper and discovered in large quantity from the Maurya and Sunga-Kusana levels at Pataliputra and elsewhere in Bihar was an important cosmetic aid of the period. Antimony rod was used by fashionable women for applying collyrium to the eyes and also for clearing nails and ears.

The evidence discussed above suggests that great attention was paid to the details of personal beautification. This is in keeping with the general sense of cleanliness seen from the excavated remains of an elaborate sewage system such as covered wooden drains and ring-wells. The terracotta skin-rubbers which are found in several designs further confirm the cleanly habits of the Pataliputra citizens. The skin-rubbers were evidently used as skin-cleaners at the time of taking bath.

Megasthenes refers to the simple food of the citizens, though he is critical of the practice according to which each member of the family ate alone and according to his desire. The principal meals consisted of boiled rice and curry which is described by Megasthenes as rice-pottage. Boiled rice and curry constitute even today the principal mid-day meal of the average Indian. Megasthenes commends the fact that the Indians never drink wine except at sacrifices and that the favourite beverage is a liquor extracted from rice and not barley. The observation does not appear to be a realistic one in view of the frequent literary and epigraphic references to toddy-tapping and other methods of preparing beverages. The pottery assemblage discovered in the course of excavations would, however, confirm the food habits mentioned by Megasthenes. The large earthen handis which have come to light must have been used for cooking rice as is the practice in most of the poor Indian families. The bowls and dishes appear to have formed part of the dining set in an average family while large jars and basins were meant for purposes of storage. It is significant that big jars and basins were of the black and red ware, the common man's pottery in most Indian settlements of the early historical period.

Though the Greek writer's description of city life relates mainly to the higher strata of society there are passages which emphasize differences between the various classes of urban population in contemporary Pataliputra. For instance, the ambassador mentions that the most affluent people in society used elephants as a means of transport, the less affluent rode in carriages drawn by four horses, still less well-to-do men used the camel for transport, but it was not a sign of dignity to ride carriages drawn by a single horse. The distinction between the first two groups of people was

obviously not a sharp one; for kings and other members of the royal and aristocratic families could use both the elephant and the chariot drawn by four horses. But in terms of affluence and status, there was a sharp distinction between people using first two carriages and those who used the last mentioned vehicle. The carriage drawn by a single horse is evidently the traditional *ekka* or *tanga*, an inferior variety of which is still surviving as the poor man's mode of transport in today's Patna. The elephant and chariots are no longer convenient modes of transport, but none the less these continue to remind us of their status value on many a ceremonial occasion.

The problem of social stratification can be studied on the basis of archaeological excavations conducted in widely separated localities of the same ancient town, as we find in the case of Pataliputra. Comparing the habitational deposit of the Sunga-Kusana and Gupta phases in two separate localities of the present town of Patna namely Patna City in the east and Kumrahar in the south, one would be inclined to think that people with varying degrees of affluence occupied different areas of the ancient city. The Sunga, Kusana and Gupta phases at Kumrahar are represented by periods II, III and IV while these phases in the Patna City area are indicated by one broad time-frame called period II. Brick-built houses, pottery of different kinds, ring-wells, coins of silver and copper, and ornaments of terracotta and bone were encountered in both the sectors. But a closer examination of the excavated material from the two sites would highlight wide divergence in the material equipment of culture. It may suffice here to compare only those objects which presuppose a fair degree of sophisticated living. Referring to copper objects one finds that of the six excavated sites in the Patna City area, only one site namely Mahabirghat yields copper objects. These include a miniature copper bell, a copper spoon, a copper kohl stick and a copper pick axe. Of these, the copper bell and copper spoon are said to be objects of religious significance while the kohl stick might have been an antimony rod-cum-nail cleaner. The function of pick axe is uncertain. Similarly, of the 22 finds of coins in this region, 16 belong to the Mahabirghat site and, of the 14 copper cast coins included in these 22 finds as many as 10 belong to the Mahabirghat site. It appears that the people dwelling in this locality were better off than their immediate neighbours in the eastern part of the city.

But all this pales into insignificance when we examine similar objects from the same habitational levels in the Kumrahar area. Particularly impressive is the repertoire of personal ornaments which include bangles, bracelets, earrings and finger-rings. The ornaments were not only much larger in number when compared to those yielded by the eastern sites, but were made of materials which seem to have been beyond the means of citizens living in the eastern sector. The eastern sites revealed only ear-lobes and pendants all made of terracotta whereas the Kumrahar sites revealed bangles, ear-rings, finger-rings and bracelets. Of the 26 ornaments reported from this area, 5 were copper earrings five copper finger-rings, one bronze bracelet, 6 wrist-bangles of copper, three bangles of glass, one bangle of ivory, one bangle of chalcedony, one bangle of terracotta and one bangle of bone.

The same differential picture emerges from a comparative estimate of cosmetic aids like the copper antimony rods, nail-cleaners and ear-cleaners. From six excavated sites in

Patna City only one antimony rod was found and this single find accounts for the entire span of the Sunga, Kusana and Gupta periods. As against this five copper antimony rods were yielded by the Sunga level at Kumrahar, four by the Kusana and four by the Gupta level. The Kumrahar evidence shows that the antimony rods, with one side clubbed and the other side either pointed or with a scoop, were used as much for applying collyrium to the eyes as for cleaning nails and ears. In relation to beads the shapes appear to be common to both the eastern and southern sites but there is considerable divergence in the material from which the beads were made. For example, no beads of copper, jasper, opal, amethyst and granite were encountered in any of the eastern sites while quite a few of them were discovered from the Kumrahar region. To this, we may add the sophisticated pottery designs and dices made-of ivory and terracotta discovered from the Kumrahar sites.

The immense prosperity which the people of Pataliputra enjoyed for centuries helped them to play a pioneering role in the fields of art, literature, religion and politics. The very foundation of the city marked the beginning of Magadhan hegemony in the politics of the middle Ganga plain which involved the five neighbouring Janapadas of Kasi, Kosala, Anga, Magadha and Vajji. By the time Pataliputra made its debut in history Magadha had already emerged as the main political force in the region, with Anga annexed to it and Kasi secured as a matrimonial gift by Bimbisara. The establishment of Pataliputra saw the extension of Magadhan supremacy over the republican state of Vajji. Under Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, Pataliputra rose to the status of an imperial capital which decided the fate of the entire subcontinent, from Afghanistan in north-west to the Assam in the north-east and "from Kashmir in north to Karnataka in the south. The most enduring principles of statecraft and diplomacy were laid down here under the patronage of Maurya emperors.

The third Buddhist council held in the year 250 B. C. was a memorable event in religious annals of Pataliputra. The council represented the last attempt by the fundamentalist Theravadins to keep both the dissidents and reformers out of the Buddhist order and thereby paved the way for the ultimate split of the Buddhist faith into Hinayana and Mahayana at the fourth sangiti held in Kashmir under the patronage of Kaniska. That the dissensions were undermining the solidarity of the order is also evident from the Schism Edict of Ashok which warns dissidents against dividing the Church and even threatens them with expulsion from the Sangha. The Schism Edict was engraved at Sarnath, Sanchi and Kausambi only a few years after the meeting of the third council.

The role played by Pataliputra in the early political history of India was, however, overshadowed by its more enduring seminal influences in the fields of literature, art and religion. In the field of grammatical research Patanjali stands out as a towering figure. The Mahabhasya, which was composed in the second century B.C. is the earliest extant commentary on Panini's Eight Chapters of Grammar' (Astadhyayi). The importance of Patanjali's work lies in the fact that it helped understanding of a language which had just emerged from the Vedic obscurity and was trying to establish its identity as a refined speech (sanskrita).

About the same time as Patanjali lived, the Greeks led Menander attacked Pataliputra and set it on fire. The deposit of one foot thick ash layer overlying the Sunga habitational

level at Kumrahar is cited as the proof of this fire. Pataliputra, which was at the peak of its splendour, however, quickly recovered from this shock. Menander who had come as an invader was himself converted to Buddhism after his marathon question-answer session with Nagasena, a Buddhist celebrity of the city's monastic establishment. Menander became famous as Milinda while the questions he had put to Nagasena together constitute the famous text Milinda Panho or the Questions of Milinda. A little later the city produced another towering personality, Umasvati, the celebrated Jain teacher of Pataliputra, who is one of the very few authors respected by both the Digambara and Svetambara sects.

The intellectual fame of Pataliputra is borne out by Patanjali who states that Pataliputra was the most cultured city in contemporary India and that people flocked to it in quest of knowledge from as distant places as Malwa and Kashmir. The tradition appears to have been maintained till at least the fifth century, A.D. Fa-shien, who travelled in India from 399 to 415 A.D. and spent three years in the city studying different Buddhist scriptures informs us that a few rare Vinaya texts which he had failed to locate elsewhere were supplied to him by Buddhist monastic libraries of Pataliputra.

The last of the luminaries of Pataliputra was Aryabhata, who was the first astronomer to draw a clear line of distinction between astronomy and mathematics. In its fundamentals science of astronomy owes a good deal to this brahmin scholar of Pataliputra. He was the first to say that the earth was a sphere which rotated on its axis and that the shadow of the earth falling on moon caused eclipses. His calculation of the value of π (3.1416) and the length of solar year (365 days) remains unquestioned to this day.

The scenario at the time of Aryabhata was quite different. Pataliputra nearly disappeared from the scene of history. The hands of political patronage had long been withdrawn. This was aggravated by the conditions of a widespread economic decline which affected the city's importance as a centre of river-borne trade. But the final blow was delivered by nature itself, as if to fulfil the prophecy of the Buddha. According to a Jain tradition recorded in the Tithlogali, a Jain teacher had forecast that a devastating flood would engulf and destroy the whole city. The ascetic who made this prediction advised the Jain monks to move out in search of safer places. Soon afterwards, it began to rain heavily. The rains continued unabated for 17 days and nights. Consequently, the rivers Ganga and Sone began to overflow the banks, Sone being particularly furious. From a synchronization of literary references to Pataliputra it would appear that this devastation took place towards the close of the 6th century A.D., Altekhar preferring the year A.D. 575. Sone floods in 1975 only needs to be recollected to appreciate the extent of devastation which could be caused by 17 days of continuous downpour with both Ganga and Sone in high floods.

The evidences provided by Hiuen-tsang, who visited Pataliputra in 637 A.D., it would be evident that the havoc caused by heavy rains and flood was terrible. When Hiuen-tsang visited this place there were only a thousand families dwelling here. The pilgrim, who was shown round the ruined city has left copious details about the nature of devastation. For instance, he refers to structures which were still standing unharmed but where there was no sign of life; of these also there were not more than two or three. The rest

including the monastic complex, Asok's palace and the stupas being in a state of utter ruin. Significantly, these structures were in well-preserved condition when Fa-shien visited the place 200 years earlier. Hiuen-tsang then gives a list of those structures which had completely disappeared but about which people's memory was still fresh, The pilgrim was also shown the remains of the Kukkutarama monastery in the eastern part of the old city, but the famous Amalaka Stupa and the Gong Call stupa which were in the vicinity of this monastery and about which the pilgrim had heard so much were no longer there. For these he could not but rely on the testimony of his guide. In the third place the traveler refers to structures which had sunk into the ground with only the domes visible. It is in relation to these allusions that the destructive action of flood and rain can be seen. Referring to one of the 84000 stupas built by Asok, the pilgrim states that its basement had completely sunk and only the dome was visible. Referring to another group of five monasteries, the pilgrim writes that the foundations of all these had disappeared leaving only the basement standing out high. The sinking of strongly built brick structures within a short span of time cannot be explained except by reference to the destructive action of flood and rains which made the foundations unstable through constant seepage of water.

This dismal picture of the once flourishing city is fully substantiated by archaeological excavations in different parts of the town. After the 6th century A.D. there is no evidence of settlement in the archaeological sense of the term. It is likely that what Hiuen-tsang saw in 637 was a large village some members of which might have been dwelling in some of the dilapidated buildings. Pataliputra continued in this state till as late as the 16th century when the famous ruler of medieval India Sher Shah realised its importance as a centre of river-borne trade and revived its urban character. From the 17th century again, archaeological evidence of a considerable settlement begins to surface in the very same areas where the ruins of Maurya, Sunga and Kusana periods were identified in the underlying levels.

No archaeological corroboration of a prosperous settlement is forthcoming between the 6th and the 16th century, Pataliputra did not altogether disappear from the horizon of history. Its strategic importance occasionally led to its elevation to the status of a military outpost. Under the Pala kings of Bengal, Pataliputra and Mudgadi (Munger) were two important ksandhavaras which watched out against the political rivals. In the Khalimpur plates of king Dharmapala, the skandhavera of Pataliputra has been described in glowing terms. The place served as a feudal court where feudatories from different directions came to do the customary homage to the overlord and renew the ties of vassalage. The composer of the Khalimpur plates gives figurative description of one such occasion. He states that the brightness of the day was dimmed by the onrush rutting elephants and by the dust raised from the hooves of incoming horses. The fleet of boats had so crowded Ganga as to give the impression of a massive causeway built across the river. But for these fleeting moments of glory, Pataliputra remained an obscure, village till one of the famous Afghan ruler Sher Shah Suri infused a fresh life into it around 1540 AD. The present town of Patna is in fact a continuation of that process of revival.

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