

Aloka Parasher Sen *Editor*

Handbook on Urban History of Early India

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Contents

Part I Exploring the Urban

- 1 **Bronze-Age Harappan Environment and Cities** 3
Shereen Ratnagar
- 2 **First Urbanization: Some Old Thoughts and a New Model** 21
Prabodh Shirvalkar
- 3 **The Pre-modern Network of Ports of Call of Western India
and the Port City of Chaul** 37
Sidh Losa Mendiratta
- 4 **(Re)centring Excavation Sites as Historic(al) Heritage:
Exploring the Memory, Interpretation, and Digital
Technologies Nexus at Adichanallur and Korkai** 59
Kuili Suganya and Krupa Rajangam
- 5 **Money and Urbanization: Exploring the Entente** 79
Susmita Basu Majumdar

Part II Perceptions of the City

- 6 **The Urban Experience: Physical and Sensorial
Representations of the City in Early Sanskrit Literature** 99
Shonaleeka Kaul
- 7 **Languages and Art, How the Kushans Communicated
in an Urban Setting** 115
Xinru Liu
- 8 **Cityscapes, City Limits, and Beyond: Revisiting Early
Buddhist Art at Sanchi** 133
Parul Pandya Dhar

9	Dependencies on Water in the Urban History of Early South Asia	149
	Julia A. B. Hegewald	
 Part III The Early Historic—Processes of Urbanization		
10	The Rise of the Urban Culture in Gandhara (c. 1400–145 BCE) and the Edge Paradigm	173
	Elisa Iori	
11	Urbanization of the Ganga Plain: Culmination of Cultural Process	193
	Vibha Tripathi	
12	Social Formation and Urbanization in Iron Age-Early Historic Tamizhagam in South India	217
	V. Selvakumar	
13	Urban Centres of Early Historic Bengal: Some Definitional Issues	237
	Sharmi Chakraborty	
 Part IV Differentiating Settlements and the Urban		
14	Anchoring Early Historic Networks in the Phenomenon of Settlement Clustering	257
	Mamta Dwivedi	
15	Questioning the Centrality of Urbanism in the Early Historic Landscape of the Southern Deccan	273
	Uthara Suvrathan and Namita Sugandhi	
16	Differentiating Settlements and the ‘Urban’ Across Early Central and Eastern Deccan	293
	Aloka Parasher Sen	
17	Forged Through Multiple Entities: Revisiting Urban Landscapes of Early Odisha	321
	Elora Tribedy	
 Part V Urban Patterns in Borderland Areas		
18	Settlement Continuity and Urban Linkages in the North-West India: Circa 300 CE–1200 CE	345
	Renu Thakur	
19	Distinctive Variables and Linkages of Urbanization in Early Rajasthan	363
	Neekee Chaturvedi	

20 Historical Settlements and the Question of ‘Urban’ in the Brahmaputra Valley 385
 Manjil Hazarika

21 Ancient Seaports of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and Their Trade Network 409
 Dayalan Duraiswamy

Part VI City and Country—The Early Medieval

22 City and Country Temples in Early Medieval Gopagiri and Its Hinterland 435
 Ross Lee Bernhaut

23 The Emergence and Expansion of Religious and Exchange Centers as ‘Urban’ in Early Medieval Bihar 457
 Anil Kumar

24 Locating ‘Urban’ in Early Mediaeval Maharashtra 479
 Viraj Shah

25 Settlements, Sacrality, and Urbanity: Querying the ‘Urban’ in Early Medieval South India 503
 Ranjeeta Dutta

Chapter 23

The Emergence and Expansion of Religious and Exchange Centers as ‘Urban’ in Early Medieval Bihar



Anil Kumar

23.1 Introduction

The emergence of regional identities marked the social formation during the early medieval period.¹ During this period, we also witnessed the processes of the origin and evolution of states that were restricted earlier to the upper and middle valleys of the Ganga. Similar activities were also taking place in other parts of the sub-continent in the same period. However, large-scale agrarianization preceded this process, leading to the beginning of the regional economies of varied patterns during this period. Despite the sub-regional variations in Eastern India, a cultural idiom emerged with its own identity. The three sub-regions of eastern India, Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha underwent various developmental processes. While much of Bihar, the mid-Ganga valley, had earlier been the core area of economic development, the Bengal sub-region was still undergoing the process of the exploitation of natural resources. Despite the Magadhan intrusion into these areas and the emergence of localized state systems, economic development was only marginal. However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the Bihar region and the economic development therein.

The appellation Bihar for a territory emerges late during the twelfth century CE. The term Bihar was used for the first time by Minhaj-ud-din Abu Umar-i-Usman in his historical work the *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri*. Minhaj records that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji pounced upon Hisar-i-Bihar (the fort of Bihar), captured it, and plundered it. Thus, in early medieval times, out of the ashes of the Viharas emerged the name of a territorial unit called ‘Bihar’, which includes the ancient geographical and cultural regions of Mithila (Videha), Vaisali, and Anga. Some parts of the Mallas and Kosala territories also fell under Bihar’s jurisdiction (Pandey 1974, 99).

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North Bihar and south Bihar are two physical zones; the river Ganga flows between the two parts. North Bihar is about 22,000 square miles and comprises of flat alluvial plain except for two hills, i.e., Sumeswar and Dun Hills. South Bihar has two types of land—plain and plateau. The plain land (A plain is a broad area of relatively flat land) stretches to the south of the Ganges for about 13,000 square miles, but it is not free from hills. The Barabar Hills, the Rajgir-Jethian Hills, and the Kharagpur Hill lie in this belt. The plate (A flat, elevated landform that rises sharply above the surrounding area on at least one side) called the Chotanagpur plateau extends for about 35 thousand square miles (Diwakar 1959, 24).

The dynastic history of Bihar from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE is a period that needs to be revised and, therefore, sketchy. After the establishment of the Gupta Empire in the fourth century CE, we again get evidence for appropriately understanding Bihar's polity, religion, and socio-economic conditions. The economy of Bihar during the Gupta period was also predominantly rural and land became the primary source of sustenance. Two copper plate inscriptions of Samudra Gupta suggest that peasants and artisans were confined to their respective villages so that their self-sufficient economy might not be disturbed (Fleet 1888, 12–40).

23.2 Salient Features of Early Medieval Bihar

The early medieval history of eastern India, while witnessing the emergence of new cultural regions, also marked the beginnings of extensive agriculture leading to the production of a surplus that came to sustain several complex institutions and practices. It needs to be realized that some of the areas of eastern India became participants in a trading network for the first time during this period. Trade is regarded as a natural corollary of industry and the leading distribution channel of various products (Maity 1957, 89). In early medieval Bihar, the commercial situation was constrained due to the emerging feudal formation. The existence and nature of the town during this period illustrates this position. The urban centers of this region underwent a decisive transformation in their prime features, a development that was in consonance with the new economic pattern. Earlier urban centers of Bihar declined or disappeared by the beginning of seventh century CE. Centers like Pataliputra, Chirand, Vaisali, Rajagrha, Katra, and Champa lost their urban identity (Thakur 1981, 26–28) primarily due to their dissociation from mercantile activities. The new towns that emerged during the period—the two most representative centers being Nalanda and Vikramsila—had a distinctive character compared to the earlier urban centers. These transformed towns revolved around two functions, namely political and religious-educational. Their rudimentary exchange pattern was geared to meet the needs of the dominant institutions at these centers, primarily, religion-centered or fortified administrative nuclei. This phase of urbanization in Bihar stands in contraposition to the well-developed urban ethos of the pre-sixth century CE period. Similarly, the trade and currency network of the period also admits to a sluggish existence. Trade was sought to be localized, a development well-articulated by the growing

popularity of the *hatta* (local marketplaces), which were periodical and tended to become the centers of exchange of their respective localities, thereby undermining the chances of the continuation of long-distance commercial contact with such areas. Trade, primarily due to the constraints of the new social formation, diminished to the level of marginalia in the context of the contemporary economy (Thakur 1997, 30–32). As a reflection of this transformation from monetary exchange to dwindling cash supply, some of the contemporary Brahmanical normative texts seek to degrade the *vaiśyas* to the status of *śūdras*.

It is striking to note that the Mithila region (northern part of river Ganga) of Bihar had an important place in the trade network of the earlier period, and the alluvial rivers were its primary source of prosperity. It is noteworthy that Mithila had an extensive river system and different communication routes. Nearly all the major rivers of ancient Bihar played an active role in inter-state trade and commerce by providing an easy route for commercial activities in the early periods of the history of Bihar (Fig. 23.1). For inland travel and communication, waterways (in proximity to which stood the principal towns) were well developed early in Bihar.

There is the presentation of a large boat with at least three deck sand long oars on a seal discovered at Vaisali (AISR 1903–4, 110–111). This reference is evidence for understanding the popularity of shipbuilding and the water-borne trade. That Pataliputra was a center of river navigation is known to us from the Khalimpur Copper Plate of Dharmapala (*EI, Vol. IV, 254*). This inscription gives a vivid and exciting description of Pataliputra as a river port. Dharmasvamin, in his account has mentioned a boat that could carry 300 passengers across the Ganges to Magadh from Tirhut (Mithila) (Roerich 1959, 2–13). In fact, Dharmasvamin crossed the river

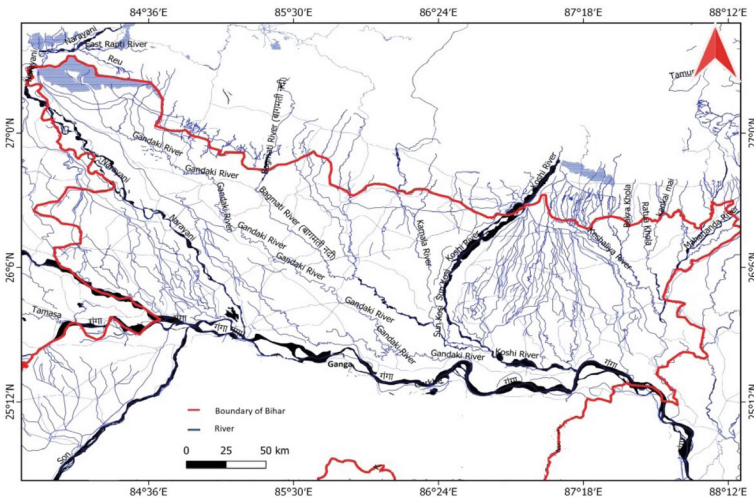


Fig. 23.1 Map of north Bihar (Mithila) showing major rivers and their tributaries. *Source* Courtesy Manish Yadav, IIT Indore

Ganges at Krimila while traveling from Simrongarh (Nepal) to Bodh Gaya (Picron 1991, 241).

Though there needs to be more direct evidence of trade for the period under review, we do, however, possess several indirect references to understand that Bihar actively participated in the commercial activities of India in ancient times, both internally and externally. The latter was more apparent in the context of trade with China, South East Asia and Rome.² It has rightly been observed that it is impossible to produce every article of daily use in one region. Naturally, different regions had to depend to some extent on the mutual contributions of the products of the other. This interdependence for production was primarily responsible for the inland trade. Bihar carried on some internal trade in the ninth to twelfth century CE, but we have yet to learn of its volume, or the commodities involved. As a customs officer, the *saulkikā* (*EI*, Vol. XVII, 310) levied duties on traders. The *tarikā* or *tarapālika* (*EI*, Vol. XVII, 310) may have had something to do with trade by way of regulating ferry and river transport. Use of currency might have been in practice for exchanges or payment of wages during this period as evident from a reference that states that a tank was constructed at Gaya with one thousand ‘*dramas*’ (*ASIAR* 1908–09, 150). Unfortunately, except for one silver coin of Vighrahapala II and a gold coin attributed to Devapala, no coin other than *Gadahiyā* has come to light so far from the early medieval period in Bihar (Kumar 1999, 50).

Further, there is no indication of towns specializing in trade and commerce in this period. Nalanda, Bodh Gaya, Kurkihar, and Udantapuri (near Biharsharif) were monasteries or religious institutions. Mudgagiri (Munger) was an important military camp or temporary capital, but nothing shows that these centers were important for craft and commerce. Centers seemed to have been primarily religious or military establishments, but they were more significant than the villages and their material base was not agrarian. The decay of the great urban centers of Bihar and the decline of the earlier economic pattern was marked by a diminution in long-distance trade, resulting in the growth of a closed economic pattern. Some references indicate that economic activities in contemporary Bihar were centered around religious or administrative centers. Big marketplaces became *hattas* (local markets) near the administrative or religious centers. In Nalanda (*EI*, Vol. XXV, 334–335). Local of periodical exchange centers emerged near the religious of administrative centers. Archaeological surveys/explorations and analysis of contemporary literature substantiate the argument. The functional nature of urban centers changed over this period. While most ancient (pre-Gupta) urban centers were either commercial or administrative, this character changed but they continued to exist during the Gupta period. Most of them became either religious or fortified administrative nuclei. This character change speaks of their disassociation from commercial activities of the market.

Given this situation the claim regarding the existence of external trade in early medieval eastern India needs to be more firmly established. The expansion of the agrarian economy and the ongoing process of state formation in the region sustained the urban centers that also emerged as the centers of community activities in different regions (Thakur 1997, 38). The lessening requirements of a monetary exchange

pattern in the new milieu, the contradictions in the economy making trade unprofitable, and the apparent impact of feudal ideology and realities upon the mercantile activities as well as upon the community attached to it have generated a tendency on the part of local merchants and traders to transgress into an alien domain to acquire landed property (Yadav 1973, 273–290; Gopal 1965, 101–110, 253–256), thereby shifting them from their original profession to the ranks of the ruling landed aristocracy (Kielhorn 1984, 344).

23.3 Religious Traditions and Features

In this socio-economic and political situation, the elite of early medieval Bihar were left with sufficient surplus time for intellectual as well as religious activities. The horizon of Buddhism widened during this period through the philosophical ideas of Āryadeva, Vasubandhu, Buddhaghoṣa, and Dinnāga. Inscriptions and seals found in various places of Bihar testify to the phenomenal growth of Vaiṣṇavism, Śāktism, and Śaivism during the Gupta age. In the period under survey, there was also a restatement of values of life and affirmation of the Purānic values, which never denied the authority of the Vedas and held the Śruti as the infallible source of religion. The more significant intellectual activity resulted from controversies between the rival religious movements and philosophical schools (Fleet 1888, 276–277). References opposing this concept are also available during this period as Buddhist scholars like Āryadeva, Bhāvaviveka, and Chandrakīrti, who flourished in Bihar during the Gupta age have criticized the Saṅkhya, Vaiśeṣika, and Mīmāṃsā schools (Majumdar 1974, 464–465). Active participation and patronage provided by the Gupta dynasty rulers strengthened the growth and spread of Brahmanical religion among the masses (Bhandarkar 1981, 345–50). Inscriptions of the Gupta period suggest that people of Bihar during this age were well acquainted with Vedic and Purānic ideologies. The prowess and qualities of the king have been expressed through Purānic analogies. In one of the inscriptions, Samudra Gupta has been described as equal to the Gods Dhaṇḍa, Vāruṇā, Iṇḍra, and Antakā and who was the same axe as the God Kṛtānta (Fleet 1888, 49–51). The inscriptions of the Maukharis who ruled in the Gaya region in the first half of the sixth century CE frequently alluded to the Purānic deities (Fleet 1888, 49–51). The personal religion of Gupta rulers, i.e., Budha Gupta, Narasiṃha Gupta, Kumāra Gupta III, and Vinaya Gupta, whose royal seals have been found at Nālandā (Sastri 1946, 64–67), must have helped to increase the influence of Vaiṣṇavism in Bihar. The Basārḥ seal proves the popularity of Vaiṣṇavism in North Bihar (*AISR* 1903–4, 110–111). Popular during the period was the Avatāra (incarnation) concept of Vaiṣṇavism (*AISR* 1913–14, 126; 133). Vaiṣṇavism and other branches of Brahmanical religion were equally prevalent in contemporary Bihar. Aniconic and iconic forms and representations of Śiva have been found in several places like Basārḥ, Bhāgalpur, Nālandā, and Gayā. Besides these, Śāktism is known from the inscriptions and images in the Barabar hills. There is clear evidence for Sun

worship from various places, as for example, two seals from Basārḥ (*AISR* 1913–14, 98–185) and the image of Suryā from Barauni. The existence of the votaries of the Sun in Umga, (Fig. 23.2) Deo, (Fig. 23.3) Gaya, Kutumba, Nalanda, Ular, Deo-Barunanak, Mera, (Fig. 23.4) Rajauna, and Bhagalpur temples of the Sun is enough to prove the popularity of Sun worship among the masses of early medieval Bihar.³

Besides these forms of worship by ordinary people, the idea of bhakti was also prevalent among them. Reference to the veneration of the footprints of Viṣṇu and Śiva at Gaya, Basarh, and Baiskaran are available. The ridge from Pattharghatta, a place near Kahalgaon, shows the influence of the doctrine of bhakti (Fig. 23.5a, b).

The cult of bhakti meant that the universe was the abode of God and that human beings should earn his grace by complete surrender (Majumdar 1974, 126).

Another important early medieval temple near Patharghatta is Teen Pahar, which is in the middle of the river Ganges (Fig. 23.6a, b). At this site, evidence of a rock cut Brahmanical temple has been identified and documented. Architectural features of the stone temple suggest that it should be dated to the eleventh-twelfth-century CE. It is significant to mention that these two sites Patharghatta and Teen Pahar are located approximately 3 km north of the Vikaramshila monastery.



Fig. 23.2 Sun Temple at Umga, (Aurangabad). *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar



Fig. 23.3 Sun Temple at Deo, (Aurangabad). *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar



Fig. 23.4 Uma Mahesvara Surya sculptures, Village Mera, Patna district Bihar. *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar

Xuentsang's account reveals that Brahmanical temples were more numerous in Vrji (Vaishali) and Kajaᅅgala (Rajmahal) areas (Watters 1905, 63; 81; 178; 183). From his account, we get the reference to the existence of fifty Buddhist monasteries and ten Brahmanical temples in Magadh (Watters 1905, 86–87). From these two references by Xuantsang, it is apparent that temples in this region were constructed before the arrival of Xuantsang, and most probably, they were constructed during the Gupta period. The existence of many significant Brahmanical temple remains in eastern, southeastern, and southern parts of early medieval Magadh testifies and supports the account of Xuantsang. The important temple remains of this period in



Fig. 23.5 a, b Patharghatta. *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar



Fig. 23.6 a Temple at Teen Pahar, Kahalgaon and b Monolithic rock cut temple at Teen Pahar, Kahalgaon). *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar

the region mentioned above are Mandar, Basukinath, Deoghar, Mahadeo-Simaria, and in further southern parts of Bihar, we get evidence of early medieval temples in the Ranchi, Jamshedpur, and Chaibasa districts. Temple remains of early medieval period from these three districts of the central part of the modern state of Jharkhand are located on the important river of this region, namely, Subarnarekha. This river originates at a water fall near Ranchi and after covering around four hundred kilometers toward east connecting a few modern districts of Bengal and Odisha, submerges into Bay of Bengal. An extensive survey of ancient remains was conducted by the author in 2013–14 and during the course of this exploratory work a few early medieval temples were documented. Documenting Temple remains of Haradih (Fig. 23.7a, b) and Deuri, located on river Kanchi, a tributary of Subarnarekha is important because



Fig. 23.7 a, b Temples at Haradih, Ranchi district, Jharkhand. *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar

both the temples are of the ninth–tenth century CE and are intact and further, continue to be living centers of worship. Pilgrims from long distances visit these temples.

Besides Haradih, other important temples situated on this river valley, namely the Subarnarekha are worth mentioning. Temples at the sites of Pamiya, Ichagarh and Jayada-Chandil are important. Pamiya is located about 115 km south of Tatanagar and 65 km southwest of Chandil on the Balarampur-Jamshedpur road. The antiquarian remains including structural remains, brickbats, and other artifacts were recorded as found scattered all over the surface at the mound of Pamiya. Two temples structures were noticed in the northern area of the mound, which can be ascribed to the early medieval period. These two temples were made of burnt brick and their ground plan is rectangular. Both temples have decorated door jams.

Another important religious center with evidence of the early medieval period is Mandar Hill (Fig. 23.8a, b) of the Banka district of southeastern Bihar. The site is situated about 52 km south of Bhagalpur town. Geologically, it is a part of the Chotanagpur highlands forming a unique dome structure composed of granite rocks. Thin forest patches characterize the Mandar Hillis pediment region. It is 280 m in height, about WGS 84 Datum. The foothill area near *Papharni* is about 120 m. It lies between the two major rivers, the Chandan and the Chir, which submerges in the Ganga near Kahagaon. The Mandar Hill occupies a unique and glorious position in Bihar's cultural and religious history. It is generally associated with the famous story of the *Samudramanathan* or, the 'Churning of Ocean' by the *Devas* and the *Asuras* in Hindu mythology. This hill is said to have been used as the 'churning rod.'



Figs 23.8 **a** Mandar Hill, Banka Dist. Bihar with GIS Map, **b** Deity of Madhusudan carved on the same hill. *Source* Photograph taken by the author, Anil Kumar

23.4 Defining Urban Growth

In the first phase of the early medieval period of the history of Bihar's urban economy deteriorated, and the trade and currency networks were marginalized in the newly emerging structure of society. In this period, there are several shreds of compelling evidence for agrarian expansion and land grants given to the Brahmanas who in turn imposed restrictions on the contemporary peasantry (Thakur 1989, 87). We have definitive evidence of extensive royal grants to Nalanda's monastic establishment by the later kings of the Gupta dynasty and Harsha. It is also claimed that the later Gupta king, Damodara Gupta, who ruled in the sixth century CE, created 100 *agraharas* (Takakusu 1896, 184). Similarly, a prosperous village was granted to goddess Bhavāni by Anantvarman (Sharma 1974, 337). The number of land grants proliferated by the end of the eighth century CE due to the extension of Pāla rule in Bihar. Many villages were granted according to the system of *bhūmi-chidra-nāyena*, which it has been suggested was a tenure of bringing virgin land under cultivation (Sharma 1974, 370).⁴

The resultant extensive expansion of agriculture during the later phases of the early medieval period led to the accumulation of agricultural surplus on a larger scale in the remotest parts of early medieval Bihar and this might have involved a more local and extensive section of the elite that led to the construction of religious monuments in newer areas. Common masses were infused with the Puranic ideas of *bhakti* and were primarily involved in agricultural activities within the feudal set-up of the times. The political conditions of the period, in their very nature, were not peaceful and stable. There is considerable evidence that Bihar was at the center of a power struggle between the Palas and Pratiharas after the ninth century CE. Even prior to the Pala hegemony in Bihar, the struggle for dominance among Mukharis, Later Guptas, and a couple of local rulers did certainly impact the peace of the region. A continuous war-mongering atmosphere might have restricted the mobility of the masses. Under different local lords and chiefs a large majority of the people adopted the ideology of *bhakti* or devotion, which thus led to the spread of Puranic forms of worship on a large scale. In these economic, political, and social circumstances, new

religious centers emerged, leading to the construction of temples by rulers, locally strong communities, and the participation or contributions of ordinary people. It must be noted that these temples were less gigantic and of great artistic value when compared to the Buddhist monasteries of contemporary Bihar. The reason behind this was that the important Buddhist monasteries were constructed by the state and patronized directly by them.

On the other hand, only a few of the Brahmanical structures were supported by the main ruling families of the state and, on the contrary, they got support of the well-endowed local elite in various areas. Temple structures of this period have been reported very often by archeologists either through innumerable excavations and through exploration that they have conducted and mentioned in reports. However, the ancient historiography of Bihar, preoccupied with the importance of Buddhist, Jaina, and other heterodox monuments, has tended to overlook these reports. The question of why many temples existed during this period over large swathes of what are today the modern states of Bihar and Jharkhand, particularly near the important Buddhist sites, has never been posed. Moreover, the question of why the Pala rulers, who were known for their Buddhist inclination, later extended critical support to Brahmanas and changed the religious faith especially rulers like Rampāla, Viṅrahpāla, and others, has also remained unaddressed.

As far as the religious centers of early medieval Bihar are concerned, numerous other sources like inscriptions also throw light on the existence of important temples. Inscriptions are among the primary sources that provide essential data for the study of the religious centers that flourished in Bihar. The Bodh Gaya stone inscription of Mahānāma (Fleet 1888, 274–75) is a case in point. Some of the later Gupta inscriptions furnish valuable information about temples in Bihar. The Apsarsh stone inscription of Ādityasen records the construction of a temple of the God Viṣṇu. The Shahpur stone image inscription of the same ruler is inscribed on the pedestal of a standing image of Surya. Shahpur is situated on the right bank of the Sakri river, about 15 km southeast of the Nalanda monastery. The Deo-Barunarak inscription of Jīvitagupta II occurs on one of the four ornamented pillars of the temple at the village of Deo-Barunarak, situated about 45 km southwest of Arrah. The Mangaraon stone inscription of Viṣṇugupta comes from a village 21 km southwest of Buxar (Altekar 1941, 241–46). Another important temple situated on the bank of the river Son, in southwest Bihar is Mundesvari, located on the Kaimur-Mundesvari hills in the Bhabhua district of modern Bihar (Fig. 23.9). A votive inscription, incised on a stone slab, was found in two fragments from the Mundesvari temple and is dated to the early seventh century CE (Buckee 2020, 173–197).

A small stone inscription from Vateshvar-Asthana, a place near Patharghatta, about 12 km northeast of Kahalgau in the district of Bhagalpur, is of considerable interest. It refers to the celebration of a ceremony styled ‘Versā-Vardhana’ being performed in honor of the God Vaddeshvra (Patil 1963, 354–371). It seems to indicate some annual function or anniversary. Some of the Pala inscriptions also refer to religious centers of early medieval Bihar, the well-known example being the Bodh Gaya votive inscription of the Pala ruler Dharmapāla (Mukherji and Maity 1967, 110–114). The inscription records the consecration of a temple dedicated to the



Fig. 23.9 Mudesvari Temple, Kaimur-Mundesvari, Bhabhua district, Bihar. *Source* Courtesy Dr. Rajat Sanyal

worship of the four-faced Mahādeva. The Gaya Stone inscription of the time of the Pala ruler Nārāyaṇapal is at present in the courtyard of the Viṣṇupāda temple at Gaya. The purpose of the inscription was to record the erection of a monastery for the Brahminical ascetics by a man named Bhāṇḍadeva in the 7th year of the reign of the king Nārāyaṇapal in the month of Vaiśākha (Banerji 1933, pp. 20–21). It is important because this region was located on the road connecting Mithila region with river Ganga. Along this road we have evidence of several early medieval religious centers. Unfortunately, the exact find-spot of the terracotta plague is not known. The inscription on the plaque mentions that three persons named Sadhi, Echi, and Aka made a lotus gift at the feet of Kesana at Nagaladmka (Choudhary 1958, 132–138). The Munger stone inscription of the time of Bhāgīrtha, which was found inscribed on a slab of stone built up into the wall of the gateway near the Kastaharanighat of Munger, refers to one king Bhāgīrtha and records the construction of a temple, presumably at the ghat itself dedicated to the worship of the God Shambhu by one Gopali Krama of the Mukteshvāra family (PASB 1890, 192) who is not known from any other source.

Thus, the inscriptions from Bihar, most of them locally situated in important niches, are of considerable significance as they furnish crucial information about the existence of the temples in the state and other related aspects connected with the temple. Temples might have been organizing religious fairs on special occasions or taking initiatives to establish local markets to fulfill the needs of the pilgrims. While analyzing the religious centers, we find that they were almost spread throughout the

state. The inscriptions refer to religious centers and provide a reasonably good idea of the economic activities associated with such settlements. Remains from Nalanda and Kurkihar, near Wazirgang in Gaya district are significant findings in this regard. From both places, we get a lot of bronze images. From Kurkihar alone, around 200 bronze images have been reported. The remains of the furnaces, which indicates industrial activity from Nalanda are worth mentioning. Further, black granite stone sculptures were manufactured at Nalanda (Misra 2008, 337). Nalanda does not have any mines nearby area. Whatever minerals were required for the industrial activities must have been procured from distant regions. One stone quarry situated at a village named Patharkatti, in Gaya district, was reported. A recent hypothesis is that (Mahajan 2003, 53–57) black stone sculptures manufactured in the Magadh region might have used this quarry for the slabs of black granite stone. Both stone and metal were used to make sculptures at different centers depending on the wealth generated by the community. To carry raw materials for any industrial activity, riverine or smooth land routes and proper transport mechanisms were essential. Rivers from plateau regions of south Bihar were connected to the Nalanda region. River Falgu (ancient Nilanjana) connects Nalanda from Bodh Gaya (Fig. 23.10). Bodh Gaya was also connected with one important river of south Bihar, namely, the Mohane, which originates from the hills of Hazaribagh and submerges into the river Falgu near Bodh Gaya. Around this region a few important early medieval religious centers are located. In a recent geophysical survey conducted by us, we encountered evidence of more than twenty early medieval religious centers between Bodh Gaya and Hazaribagh. At a majority of these centers remains of religious structures were found. In this region, a significant religious center is Itkhori, in the Chatra district of Jharkhand. GPR and ERT survey of this site indicates the existence of structural remains at least a kilometer. Today villagers occupy the whole mound and a modern temple has been constructed on the ancient remains. At this site, at least one hundred Brahmanical and Buddhist sculptures and architectural members of the ancient structure were dug out unscientifically during the construction of the modern temple by the local people. All the artifacts, including the sculptures, are stored in a modern temple complex.

23.5 Case Study of Itkhori and Krimila

The site of Itkhori is located on the southern bank of the Mohane river, which is not very far from the famous Dudhapāni inscription site (Kielhorn 1896, 343–47) (Fig. 23.11). Dudhapāni inscription was situated on the Ayodhya-Tamralipti trade route. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that the site was well connected with other parts of the country. River Falgu (Nilanjana) starts from this region and submerges into river Haruhar at Nālandā via Bodh Gaya, Gaya, and Kurkihar. A large number of Buddhists and Brahmanical centers are spread over almost the whole alluvial plain of south Bihar and they certainly could not have developed without connectivity with other regions of Bihar. Connectivity of Nalanda during the early medieval period with other parts of the world is a well-established fact. Students and scholars from foreign

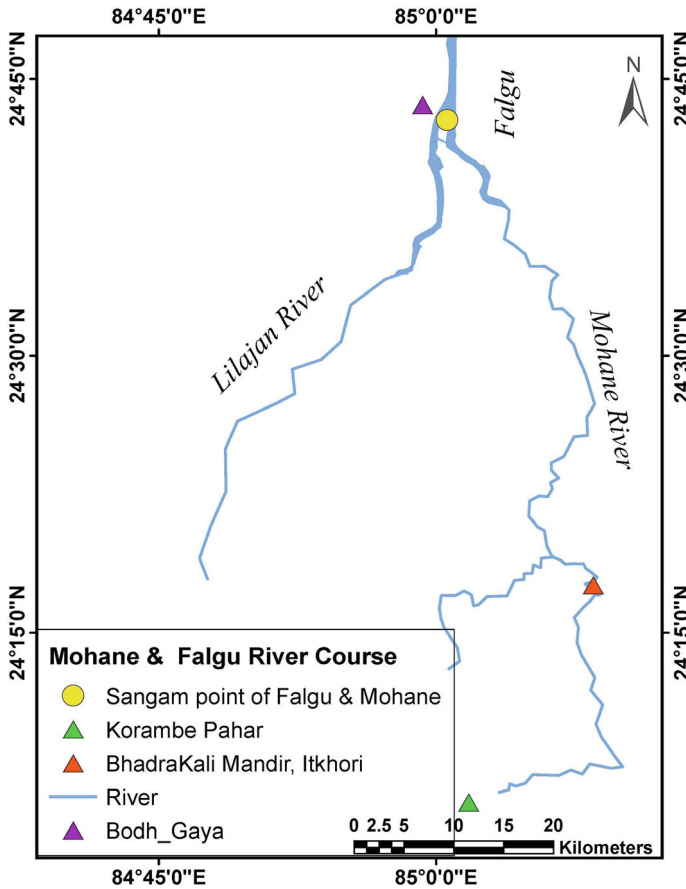


Fig. 23.10 Map showing river course Mohāne and Falgu. *Source* Courtesy Mr. Manish Yadav, IIT, Indore

countries visited the place regularly. So, without proper means of communication, including its connectivity along established routes of travel, it could not have flourished as an international center in the period under review (Pandey 1963, 201–203). It is also difficult to suggest that Nalanda developed without a solid economic basis. To substantiate this, we have enough evidence from inscriptions of this region. An inscription on a bronze image from Nalanda refers to the Devapāldevā *haṭṭa* (Ghosh 1965, 334–335). A seal has been found at what is called the Valladihhiya-*haṭṭa* (Sastri 1946, 46) (Fig. 23.12).

An important center of early medieval Bihar that drew our attention was Krimila, located near modern Lakhisarai (Kumar 2011, 27–50). In our recent archaeological work conducted at Krimila, it was noticed that this center was spread over 74 square kilometers, and more than 50 mounds of the early medieval period were identified. Evidence of three Buddhist monasteries, two stupas, eleven temple remains, and



Fig. 23.11 Study area Ithkori ground (Yellow box) used for the magnetic survey on the backyard of the Bhadrakali Temple, Chatra, Jharkhand. *Source* ESRI-Google Earth, pictures clicked by author, Anil Kumar

more than three hundred Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures were identified at this center (Kumar 2019a, b, 6–11). Besides this, another site was excavated at Lalpahari where remains of a Buddhist vihara were found (Kumar 2019a, b, 73–86). This place was connected with most of the important centers of south Bihar by rivers, namely the Haruhar and the Kuil (ancient Kṛimikalā) and via established land routes of the period (Kumar 2011, 27–28). The geographical location and the site’s richness give us reason to hypothesize that this center was probably situated on a ferry point during the period under review (Roerich 1959, 58–59). In 1871, Alexander Cunningham (Cunningham 2000a, b, 151–56) surveyed the area and noticed a Mauryan structure, NBPW, and early medieval artifacts at Rajauna, around three kilometers west of

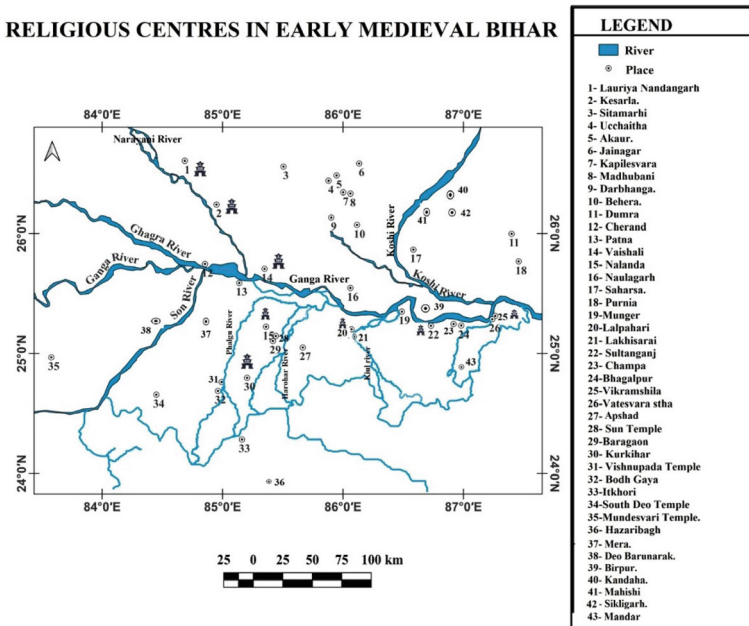


Fig. 23.12 Map showing religious centers of Bihar. *Source* Courtesy Mr. Manish Yadav, IIT, Indore

Lakhisarai (Fig. 23.13). Cunningham noted that a large town or city must have existed here. Another reason to strengthen our view that particular kinds of early medieval towns must have thrived is from data found at the site of Naulagārh (Choudhary 1957a, b, 372–374), which is situated just opposite Rajauna on the north bank of the river Ganga. Its antiquity was noticed in the 1950s when an inscription reported from this site that was incised on the pedestal of a broken image refers to the 24th regnal year of Pāla king Viṅrahpāla (Patil 1963, 337–38). Important north Bihar rivers were connected to this site as well. It was connected with river Kamala Balan, which in turn was connected to two major rivers of north Bihar, namely the Kosi and the Bagmati.

23.6 Trade Connections

Therefore, it can be concluded that goods from Nalanda, Matadih, Vikramasila and the Sahibgunj stone were transported to north Bihar via this river network. From Krimila around 50 km east, we have Munger, and from Munger at a distance of 36 km is Jahangirā (Sultāngunj) (Sahai 1963, 137–146). From Jahangirā at a distance of 28 km east is Bhagalpur (Ancient Champā) and from here to Kahalgāon seat of the Vikramasila monastery and Pattharghatta it is about 32 km east. All these four

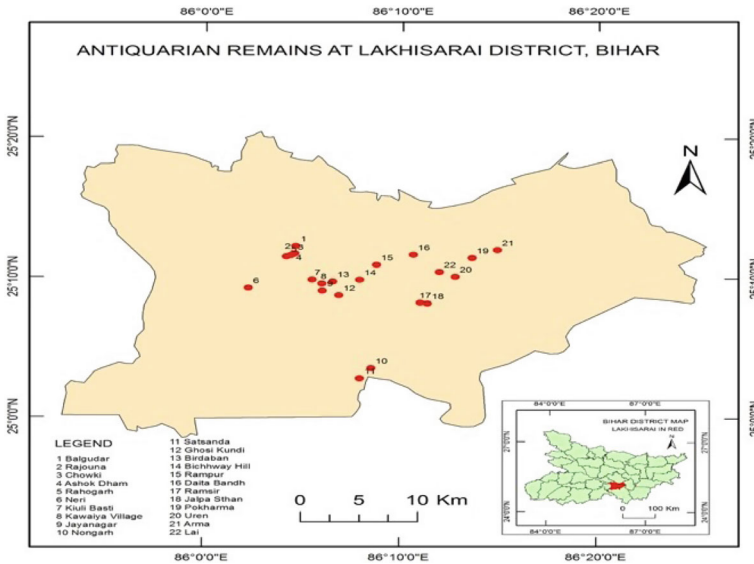


Fig. 23.13 Map antiquarian remains of Lakhisarai Dist. Bihar. *Source* Map prepared by the author, Anil Kumar

important religious-educational centers were located on the southern bank of the river Ganga. Therefore, after analyzing the location of early medieval religious monuments, it appears that rivers connected all the major centers mentioned above. Thus, Itkhori, was connected from Krimila via Nalanda, Kurkihar, Gaya, Bodh Gaya by the rivers Haruhar, Falgu and Mohane. Between Nalanda and Vikramasila, important religious or administrative centers of the early medieval period, namely Ghosarama, Apsarh, Krimila, Munger, Jahangira, and Champa were all connected by the rivers as well as land routes.

It needs to be emphatically asserted that during this period there is enough evidence to show that travelers and merchants alike had used both land and river routes. The routes passing through mountainous areas have remained almost the same since time immemorial. In a hilly region, it is not easy to chart out or find new routes as they run through certain passes and therefore, their number is always significantly less. However, roads running through the plains are apt to change because people can move freely in such regions without definite routes. In the plains, routes could be easily made to facilitate communication. Bihar is not an exception to this. Since the land of north and central Bihar was plain we find plenty of roads running from one part of the region to another. The Buddhist literature mentions important routes of the time, which connected important cities of northern India. In those days, it was complicated to cross the Ganga except at specified ferry points. We, therefore, find that roads ran along the south and north banks of the river Ganga (Chandra 1953, 17). Fa-Hien and Xuantsang traveled by many routes. A trade route ran from Savatthi (Sravasti) to Rajagrha, passing through Setevya, Kapilavastu, Kusinara,

Pava, Hatthigama, Bhandagama, Vaisali and across to Pataliputra by the river ran up to Nalanda. The road probably went to Gaya, and there met another route from the east, possibly from Tamralipti that went up to Varanasi (Watters 1905, 178).

Fa-hsien entered Bihar by the high road leading from Vaisali to Kusinagara and further west. He then crossed the Ganga and followed the Pataliputra-Rajagriha road. From Rajagriha, he went to Gaya to then further proceed to Kukkuta-Padagiri (identified as Kurkihār) and from there to Pataliputra when he left for Kasi and then went to Champa (Beal 1906, 83). Then he followed the old Champa-Tamralipti route and embarked for Ceylon. The route followed by Xuantsang is not so easy to explain. He entered Bihar from the district of Shahabad after leaving the Chañchu country. He probably followed the old route along the southern bank of the Ganga. He then crossed the Ganga somewhere near modern Arrah and followed the road, which led from Varanasi to Vaisali along the northern bank of the Ganga. From Vaisali, he went to Mithila along the highway. He then entered the valley of Nepal. The pilgrim returned to Vaisali and, traveling along the Vaisali-Rajagriha road, reached Tailadheka (Watters 1905, 107). While going to Champa, Xuantsang started from Nalanda, went to Giriya, and then proceeded through the hills of Sheikhpura (Watters 1905, 107) to Rajauna (Krimila) (Pandey 1963, 189–203). He then went to Hiranya-Parvat in the neighborhood of Munger, and from there, Xuantsang reached Champa after traveling 300 li (80 km). He then followed the Champa-Tamralipti road and entered Bengal. It is significant to note that Xuantsang once traveled through the river from Bodh Gaya to Champa (Sarkar 2003, 32). Besides land routes, rivers were significant routes of communication also. The trade of Champa with foreign countries was carried through the Ganga in ancient Bihar. Boats went further west to Pataliputra, Varanasi and Prayag and Indraprastha. The Khālimpur inscription of Dharpāla gives a vivid description of boats on the Ganga at Pataliputra (Kielhorn 1896, 249). Besides the river Ganga, there are many other important rivers, i.e., Son, Haruhar, Chanan, Chir, Kosi, Kamla Balan, and Gandak, in which people still use boats for communication. Although we do not find specific trade activities carried through these important rivers in early medieval Bihar, the possibility of using these rivers for at least local communication cannot be denied.

Nalanda and Kurkhiar were the most important centers because their connectivity was not restricted to only Bihar. In fact, reference to pilgrims from distant places, like Sakāla in Punjab, Malabar in Kerala and also from Southeast Asian countries visiting Nalanda occasionally has been noted (Patil 1963, 221–22). Connectivity with other regions is evidenced by the discovery of coins from far and near. Though coins in Bihar during the early medieval period have not been found in large numbers, some significant discoveries can be mentioned. The discovery of Śāsānka's single gold coin, three gold coins of Lalitāditya Pratāpāditya II of Kashmir, a large number of silver coins showing Sassanian fire altar, and legend 'Śri-Vigra' perhaps of the predecessor of Bhoja I Pratīhāra, a silver coin of Bhoja I Pratīhāra, a gold coin of Govindchandra Chandra deva at Nālandā and copper coin at Rājagrha are clear evidence for Nalanda's commercial significance during the early medieval period (Misra 2008, 337).

As detailed above the discovery of several sculptural finds help us map possible trade routes in north Bihar. We also noted that raw material for making these sculptures had to be imported into this part of Bihar because this region had no hill of black stone mines for making the stone sculptures. Sculptures found are noted to be stylistically identical to the sculptures found in south Bihar. These are sufficient reasons to assume that there might have been proper connectivity between south and north Bihar during this period. It is possible that finished sculptures were imported in north Bihar from manufacturing centers, near the quarry sites in the southern part of Bihar (Kumar 2019a, b, 1–37; Asher 1998, 313). The rivers of north Bihar are mostly navigable, so local trade must have been carried along them since early times. However, we have no definite evidence to support this. The foreign pilgrims are also silent about any communication by water in north Bihar.

23.7 Conclusion

This survey of the available evidences pertaining to the early medieval religious centers of Bihar does enable one to argue that in a new stage of social formations in the peripheries of Gangetic plains of Bihar. The exhaustion of the material base of core area of Bihar crystalized a process leading to the emergence of regional networks in the erstwhile peripheries. In other words, regions like Himalayan basin of north Bihar, where all the major rivers originate flow through a considerable length in Nepal and large part of their catchment falls in the glacial regions of Himalayas. These rivers are snow fed and hence perennial in nature. Another important region in this regard were north–south Chotanagpur plateau and Santhal Pargana, which witnessed the process of formation of state-society and other related developments during this period, and there could have been space for establishing commercial activities.

Although the commercial activities during this period could not match with those of the ancient centers of exchange in Bihar, certainly they had not completely disappeared. A majority of the above-mentioned religious sites were multi-religious centers and large in size. While analyzing the religious, educational and administrative centers of early medieval Bihar we find that these centers spread over the entire north and south Bihar (Including the modern state of Jharkhand). A couple of inscriptions provide us data for assuming the hypothesis of the existence of economic activities; though local in nature, situated around such settlements. These local economic centers were primarily catering to the needs of pilgrims and also the nearby agrarian settlements. This indicates that the localized nature of inland trade and the emergence of local market centers were a portion of village products that were sold. Probably at these centers, the surplus produced by agrarian community settled in the hinterland of these centers were handed over to the merchants, who transported it to the trading centers of other parts of the country. Location of religio-educational and administrative centers of early medieval Bihar were either on the old trade routes or, in the plains where easily new routes could have been created. Most of the contemporary

important centers were connected by river as well as land routes which provided access to pilgrims as well as to the traders.

Although direct evidence of economic activities is rare to find from a few of these centers, however, we should keep in mind that most of them are still unexcavated and even unexplored systematically. Size, location, and the artifacts lying near these centers provide evidence of their material background. A large number of sculptures, architectural remains, remains of monumental structures reported from these centers, signify their importance, which leads us to conclude that they cannot be treated as small and insignificant centers. The emergence and existence of a large number of religious and educational centers of contemporary Bihar also indicate the existence of an appropriate material base for economic exchange centers as these religious and educational centers, their respective members, visitors and the local population were dependent on these exchange centers for their bare requirements and survival. The nature of these exchange centers varied across time and space, based on the region and the requirement, but their existence, emergence and importance is a crucial area to be further researched in order to draw co-relations with the trade patterns and practices existing during the emergence of large number of these religious and educational centers in early medieval Bihar.

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Notes

1. The discussion on Bihar in this chapter includes the modern state of Jharkhand.
2. Roman gold coins found in South Bihar (Singh 1984, 15) testify to trade with Rome.
3. The above description has been drawn from the author's previously published article titled as '*Emergence of Temple Centered Society in Early Bihar: Mundesvari Inscription a Case in Point*', 2(2), 2012, pp. 332–340, published by David Publishing, with the due permission from the publisher i.e. David Publishing.
4. Some of the material cited in the above paragraphs the author's previously published article titled as '*Emergence of Temple Centered Society in Early Bihar: Mundesvari Inscription a Case in Point*', 2(2), 2012, pp. 332–340, published by David Publishing, with the due permission from the publisher i.e. David Publishing.

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