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Agrarian Foundations and Urban Networks: Understanding the Rural–Urban Continuum of Ancient Kashmir

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Abstract

This study examines the rural-urban continuum in ancient Kashmir, emphasizing how a productive agrarian base supported urban centers, market towns, and religious sites. Rice cultivation, boosted by state-led irrigation projects such as those under engineer Suyya during King Avantivarman's reign, formed the economic foundation. High-value crops, such as saffron and grapes, have added to the wealth and trade. Urban centers, including Srinagara and newer cities such as Parihasapura and Avantipura, were strategically positioned to capitalize on agricultural output and trade routes. Market towns, such as Patan, linked rural areas to major transit routes. The rural-urban relationship was governed through administrative divisions such as Visayas and Parganas, with powerful feudal landowners managing the fertile districts. Religious sites scattered across the landscape connect urban and rural populations, serving as cultural and economic hubs supported by land grants. The flow of resources from rural to urban areas enabled the construction of grand temples and cities, reflecting the wealth and political power derived from agriculture. This system illustrates ancient Kashmir as a complex, integrated network, rather than a simple rural-urban divide.

Keywords: Rural-urban continuum, Ancient Kashmir, Agrarian economy, Irrigation systems, Urban centers

Introduction

The Rural-Urban Continuum is a conceptual framework within urban studies that perceives rural and urban areas not as distinct, mutually exclusive categories but as points along a spectrum. This continuum situates rural communities at one extreme and fully urbanized cities at the other, with transitional zones, such as suburban areas and small towns, positioned in between. This framework reflects the notion that rural and urban areas share overlapping characteristics and are integral components of a broader social fabric. The Rural-Urban Continuum facilitates a nuanced understanding of social dynamics and issues such as migration, development, and urbanization by acknowledging the gradual transitions between rural and urban spaces. It is also instrumental for policymakers in formulating development strategies that address the specific needs of communities along this continuum. (Sociology Institute, 2022)

In ancient Kashmir, rural regions were characterized by agrarian villages primarily engaged in the cultivation of staple crops and horticulture, supported by close-knit kinship and caste-based social networks. The verse is found in the Lokaprakāśa and is cited as follows:

“Sastir grama sahasrani sastir grama satamca sastir grama strayo grama hyetat Kasmira mamdalam” This translates to "Sixty thousand villages, sixty hundred villages, sixty villages, and three villages; this is the Kasmira mandala."

The antiquity of this number is supported by an allusion to it in the Jonarāja's Chronicle. While the figure of 66,063 is acknowledged as a "considerable exaggeration," it is considered characteristic of the popular belief in the valley's high population density. The 1891 census counted the number of villages in Kashmir at 2,870. (Rajatarangini, 1900, pp. 438-440). These villages were often self-sufficient, with limited infrastructural development, but rich in traditional knowledge and local governance structures, representing the rural end of the continuum of village development. Transitional or semi-urban zones in ancient Kashmir manifested as small towns or market centers that emerged along trade routes and riverbanks, serving as hubs for the exchange of goods, cultural interactions, and administrative activities. These towns combined features of rural life, such as community cohesion and agricultural dependency, with growing urban influences, including specialized crafts, religious institutions, and more complex social stratification. The rural-urban continuum of ancient Kashmir was a deeply interconnected system in which a prosperous agrarian base provided the foundation for the development and sustenance of a sophisticated network of urban centers, market towns, and religious sites. This relationship is evident in the strategic location of cities, management of agricultural resources, and flow of goods and people throughout the valley. The ancient Kashmiri landscape was not a simple dichotomy between rural and urban but a complex web where agricultural surplus from the fertile plains and Udars supported a network of capitals, market towns, and religious centers, all linked by rivers, roads, and administrative structures.

Literature Review

The rural-urban continuum covers the interdependence, distinctions, and tensions between urban and rural settlements in ancient India. Robert Redfield's theory of the urban-rural continuum, which posits a spectrum from tribal villages to cities with progressively increasing social complexity, division of labour, secularism, and individuality. While noting the difficulty of applying this modern theory to ancient communities due to limited literary and archaeological data, the author infers that some of these variables were likely present in ancient India (Gosh,1973 p.38). Cities had a predominantly non-agricultural population (merchants, officials, craftsmen) who were dependent on rural areas for food and raw materials (Gosh, 1973, p.18). This necessitates the presence of merchants to manage the supply chain. In turn, rural areas depended on urban centers as markets for their produce (Gosh, 1973, p.55). Specialized villages of craftsmen (carpenters, weavers, potters) and professionals were located around cities (Gosh, 1973, p.36). This suggests that some production, particularly that which requires more space, was situated in the rural periphery to serve the urban market, highlighting a functional link within the continuum. Urban centers require a social and political structure (rulers and merchants) to extract surplus food from the rural hinterland, either through coercion (taxes) or trade. This forced interdependence was crucial for the city's existence (Gosh, 1973, p.20).

1. Agrarian Production as the Foundation for Urban Life

Urban centers were populated predominantly by non-agricultural specialists such as administrators, merchants, craftsmen, and priests who did not produce their own food (Gosh, 1973, p.18). Agrarian production in the surrounding rural villages was therefore essential for the existence of cities, as it generated the food and raw materials required by the urban population (Gosh, 1973, p.23). In Kashmir Rice was the primary agricultural product, so crucial that it was often referred to simply as dhānya ('grain'). Its cultivation was supported by an extensive and ancient irrigation system that harnessed the region's abundant water resources. The efficiency of this system allowed for a significant surplus, which was the bedrock of the entire economy (Stein. A, 1900, p.427). Saffron (kuṅkuma) Saffron is another famous product of Kashmir. Kalhana, in his introduction to the Rajatarangini, designates saffron as one of the things that are "difficult to find even in heaven" but were common in Kashmir. The cultivation of saffron flourished particularly around Padamapura (modern Pāmpaṛ). Grapes were so well regarded that the name Kasmira was used in Sanskrit lexicons (Kosas) to denote a special variety of grapes. The chronicle mentions that they were once plentiful in localities such as Maratanda.

The state actively invests in agriculture, which is a sign of its foundational importance. The engineer Suyya, under King Avantivarman, is credited with large-scale projects that regulated the Vitastā River and created systematic irrigation channels. This state-led improvement in agrarian infrastructure dramatically increased productivity, causing the price of rice to fall from 200 to 36 Dinnaras per Khari. This surplus was essential for feeding the non-agricultural urban population (Stein. A, 1900, p.428).

The wealth derived from agricultural surplus funded the ambitious construction projects that defined the urban centers. Rulers were able to found new capitals, such as Avantipura, Parihasapura, and Jayapura, and adorn existing ones, like Srinagara, with magnificent temples. The massive ruins of these structures are a testament to the immense resources extracted from the agrarian economy to support urban splendour (Stein.A,1900 pp.444-445). Thus, the relationship was one of mutual dependence: the cities depended on the countryside for food and wealth, while the countryside was organized, administered, and often exploited by the political and religious institutions cantered in the cities. The prosperity of one was inextricably linked to the other's productivity. Administrative control ensured the efficient collection of revenue from the land, which, in turn, financed the court, army, and urban infrastructure.

The Nilamata Purana describes Kashmir as a land capable of producing all types of grains, with an abundance of Sali crops (a type of rice) and good quality fruits. The text concludes that the joyful life of the people, characterized by arts, crafts, and festivals, was based on economic prosperity, which depended mainly on agriculture and trade. The land provided the essential resources for diet, dress, and dwelling, which were then refined by artisans and craftsmen. The existence of markets is implied by the instruction to decorate shops on Karttika Amavasya, indicating commercial activity supported by a productive agricultural base. (Ghai, 1968, p.126). The primary food appears to be rice, with three varieties mentioned: Sali, Tandula, and Syamaka (Ghai 1968, p.120). Barley (Yava) was also a significant crop, described as the "king of all the herbs (Ghai,1968, p.124)." Paddy seeds were sown in the month of Phalguna. The

harvest was likely reaped around the end of Bhadrapada or the beginning of Asvayuj, as a ceremony for new grains is mentioned in Asvayuji. Barley crops were ready in Vaisakha or Jyeshtha. Irrigation is well developed. The term ‘adevamatrka’ used for Kashmir suggests that rivers, lakes, and fountains were utilized for agriculture, which was feasible due to the natural formation of the valley (Ghai,1968, pp.126-128).

2.The Emergence and Sustenance of Urban Centers

Nilamatapurana suggests that a prosperous agrarian base and active trade were The pillars of the region's economy, which would have been essential for the sustenance and growth of towns or cities. Urban centers in ancient Kashmir were not isolated entities but strategically located to leverage the valley's agrarian and communication networks. The land tenure system was apparently not oppressive, and cultivators celebrated joyful agricultural festivals (Ghai,1968, p.96). This stable and productive agricultural environment would have provided a reliable foundation for urban life.

Markets and Traders: The document implies the existence of markets in towns through a reference to the decoration of shops in the towns. Furthermore, it highlights the respectable position of traders who participated in the king's coronation rites, suggesting their importance in the societal structure. Urban centers are natural hubs for commercial activities.

Trade Routes: The text mentions that Kashmir had brisk trade relations with the plains of India and Central Asia before the rise of the Hunas. The reference to a specific "salt-road" (lavanasarani) used for importing salt indicates established communication and trade routes that would have connected urban centers to the wider region.

Imports and Exports: The import of salt and Chinese silk (Cinamsuka), along with the export of valuable items such as saffron, underscores Kashmir's integration into long-distance trade networks. Urban centers would have served as the nodes for managing this trade, linking local production (such as saffron) to external markets (Ghai,1968, pp.97,128).

There is no direct statement about urban planning in the Nilmatapurana, but the evidence strongly suggests that any urban center in ancient Kashmir would have fundamentally depended on the valley's rich agricultural output and its connection to regional trade routes for its existence and prosperity.

Capital, Srinagara (Pravarapura): The capital city, Srinagara, is strategically situated at the heart of the valley. Its position on the Vitastā river provided a convenient route for trade and traffic both up and down the valley. Proximity to the Dal and Anchar lakes facilitated communication with the fertile northern tracts and provided an abundant supply of products for the large city population. The relationship between the capital, Śrīnagara, and its adjacent villages and rural areas was one of deep interdependence, characterized by economic exchange, resource supply, and political and social interactions.

Supply and Sustenance: The rural hinterland was crucial for sustaining the large urban population of Śrīnagara. The city's strategic location near the Dal and Anchar lakes provides easy access to fertile tracts of land in the vicinity. These lakes and the surrounding areas

furnished an abundant supply of products that were essential for the maintenance of the city's population (Stein,1900, pp.444-445).

Trade and Communication Hub: Śrīnagara served as a central node for trade and traffic. The Vitastā river acted as a major artery, facilitating the movement of goods from rural areas both up and down the valley. Numerous canals within Śrīnagara served as thoroughfares for market traffic, bringing produce and goods from the countryside directly into the heart of the city's bazaars. The capital's proximity to the great trade route from Central Asia also positioned it as the primary market and distribution center for goods coming from and going to the rural districts (Stein,1900, pp.444-445).

Political and Social Interaction: The capital was the seat of power, but it was closely connected to the surrounding villages, which often played a role in political events. For instance, Brahmans from the suburban area of Rājānavāṭikā (modern Rān'vor) held significant influence, using solemn fasts to pressure King Sussala during political turmoil. The rural elite, or Damaras, from districts like Lahara, held immense power and often played the role of "king-makers," directly influencing the politics of the capital (Stein, 1900, p. 451,488).

Resort and Religious Center: The environs of Śrīnagara, particularly the area around Dal Lake, were a favourite resort for the city's inhabitants. This region, known as Phakh, was dotted with numerous sacred sites, temples, and pilgrimage places, such as Suresvarīkṣetra and the Tīrtha of Tūlamūlya, which attracted a constant flow of people from the capital to the surrounding rural and semi-rural areas for religious and leisure purposes. In essence, Srinagara acted as the consuming heart of the valley, drawing in resources, food, and wealth from the surrounding rural areas, while simultaneously functioning as the administrative, political, and cultural hub that organized and influenced life in those villages (Stein, 1900, p. 452,488).

Foundation of New Cities: The ability of rulers to found new cities and capitals like Parihasapura (Lalitāditya's), Jayapura (Jayapida), and Avantipura (Avantivarman) demonstrates immense prosperity derived from the land (Stein,1900, p.445). These cities were often located in fertile areas and served as centers of royal power, religion, and administration.

Market Towns (Pattana): This text mentions the foundation of Pattana (Patan) by King Samkaravarman. While the king's architectural ambitions were criticized, the town's strategic location on the main road between Srinagara and Baramula ensured its importance as a center for trade in cattle and woollen cloths, linking the rural hinterland to major transit routes (Stein,1900, p.481).

3.The Rural-Urban Network and Continuum

The relationship between rural and urban areas is a dynamic continuum characterized by economic interdependence, administrative control, and movement.

Religion as the connecting link between the rural and urban centers in Kashmir

Si-Yu-Ki provides a distinct rural-urban religious continuum in Kashmir can be inferred from the distribution of religious sites and the movement of religious figures and followers between urban centers and more remote, mountainous areas.

Urban Religious Centers

The capital city and its immediate vicinity served as major hubs for religious activities. The text describes a "new city" and an "old city" (Purânâdhishṭhâna) that housed significant religious structures. Relic Worship: A Sangharama (monastery) located about 10 li southeast of the new city contained a tooth relic of the Buddha, which was a major object of worship. This urban-proximate site attracted followers and had a history involving a Sramana (monk) who brought the relics there. Scholarly Activity: Renowned masters of the sastras, such as Skandhila, composed important religious treatises in small convents near the city, indicating that the urban area was a center for high-level theological and philosophical work. Political and Religious Intersection: The text describes how kings like Kanishka and the king of Himatala pacified the country, established order from the capital, patronized the Buddhist priesthood, built sangharamas, and promoted the religion. This suggests that urban administrative power was directly linked to the establishment and protection of religious institutions (Beal, 1884, pp.157-161).

Rural and Remote Religious Sites:

Si-Yu-Ki also highlights the spiritual significance of remote, mountainous regions far from urban centers, illustrating the religious continuum extending into the countryside. Monasteries in Remote Locations: About 30 li southeast of a small Sangharama near the capital, there was an old, ruined Sangharama in a "great mountain" where the esteemed master Sanghabhadra composed the Nydydnusdra Sastra. The presence of stupas for great Arhats and offerings of flowers by wild animals and apes underscores its sanctity. Going 140-150 li west of the city led to a Sangharama of the Mahasanghika school. 200 li northwest of the royal city was the Mai-lin Sangharama, where Master Parna composed a commentary. Movement for Religious Purposes: The text details the movement of religious practitioners between these areas. For example, after the Kritiya race destroyed the law of Buddha, priests dispersed and hid in the mountains and valleys. Later, an Arhat council, seeking a quiet place to compile scriptures, chose Kashmir specifically because it was a place where "saints and sages assemble and abide; here the spiritual Rishis wander and rest (Beal, 1884, pp.153-162)."

Continuum and Interdependence

The relationship was dynamic, with urban centers providing the political stability and patronage necessary for religious institutions to flourish. Remote mountain areas offer the seclusion needed for deep meditation, scholarly composition, and refuge during times of persecution. Monks and scholars moved between these zones seeking knowledge, relics, or safety, thus creating a living religious connection across the entire landscape of Kashmir. Sacred sites (tirthas) are dotted across the landscape, connecting urban populations with the rural and mountainous countryside. The capital's residents made pilgrimages to sites such as Sureśvarī on the shores of the Dal, Chakradhar, Vijayesvara, and the famous Maratanda shrine. These sites, often endowed with land grants (Agraharas), acted as economic and cultural nodes in the rural-urban network.

Administrative Links:

The administrative links between rural and urban centers in ancient Kashmir were primarily established through a centralized system of revenue collection and state control that extended from the agricultural fields of villages to the markets of towns. The state, headed by the king, created a bureaucracy to manage these links and extract resources from both spheres of society.

Key Administrative Links: Revenue and Taxation System: The most significant link is the state's taxation apparatus. The government's primary income came from land revenue collected from the rural agricultural base. To manage this, a hierarchy of officials was established. Gramakayastha (Village Accountant): This official kept records of a cultivator's land holdings and their corresponding revenue liabilities at the village level. Skandaka (Lambardar): This likely refers to a village headman involved in the revenue collection process. Watchmen: The state employed special watchmen in the fields to ensure that cultivators did not remove their produce from the threshing ground before the state's share had been taken. This shows direct state supervision at the most fundamental level of rural economy. State Granaries and Distribution: The revenue collected from grain was stored in state granaries. This grain could then be distributed, presumably in both rural and urban areas, at fixed rates during emergencies, creating an administrative link based on food security and resource management.3 Extension of Taxation into Urban and Domestic Life: The state did not limit its taxation to rural agriculture. Rulers like Samkaravarman created new administrative offices to extend state control over urban and domestic activities: Attapatibhaga (The Lord of the Market): This office was established to impose taxes on markets, directly linking the state's administration to urban commercial centers. Grahakrtya (Domestic Affairs): This office-imposed taxes on domestic affairs, and under later rulers like Susala, taxes were levied on marriages and other ceremonies, affecting householders in both towns and villages. Control of Trade Routes: The state administration controlled the arteries of commerce that connected Kashmir's urban centers with the outside world. Watch stations, called Dranga, were established at the end of each mountain pass. Customs officers were posted at these stations to collect duties on all goods entering the country. Goods were stamped and registered, indicating a formal administrative process for trade. Soldiers were stationed at these posts to safeguard the routes, linking administrative control with military presence.6 Royal Estates and Land Ownership: The king was the titular owner of cultivated lands and held royal estates. The king himself arranged the cultivation of these royal lands, which were extensive enough to supply fodder for the army, demonstrating a direct administrative link between the king's court and agricultural production (Ganie and Bhat, 2020, pp.70-72). The administrative links were primarily extractive, designed to channel wealth from productive rural bases and urban commercial activities to the state exchequer. This was managed through a bureaucracy of tax collectors, accountants, and market controllers who operated in both villages and towns under the king's authority. The valley was divided into numerous administrative districts (Visayas, later Parganas), indicating a high level of state control over rural landscapes. Feudal landowners, or Damaras, residing in fertile districts like Holada (Vular) and Lahara (Lar), played a significant role in the state's politics, demonstrating the power derived from controlling agrarian resources (Stein, 1900, p. 445).

Flow of Resources: The construction of grand temples and cities in urban areas relies on resources from the countryside. King Samkaravarman's, for instance, carried away materials from the older capital of Parihasapura to build his new town at Paṭṭana.14 The city of Srinagara was adorned with countless temples, the remains of which, seen in the city's modern river embankments, attest to the vast wealth drawn from the kingdom to fund urban splendour (Stein, 1900, p.436). The flow of resources significantly shaped the relationship between rural and urban areas in ancient Kashmir, particularly influencing the rise of a powerful feudal class, the Damaras.

The Rise of Feudal Lords (Damaras)

The accumulation of wealth in rural areas was a primary factor in the emergence of the Dāmaras, a class of powerful feudal landowners. An ancient political maxim attributed to King Lalitāditya warned his successors not to allow cultivators to accumulate surplus resources, specifically more food than needed for a year's consumption or more oxen than required for tillage. The reason was that if villagers kept more wealth, they would rapidly become formidable Dāmaras, powerful enough to defy the king's commands. This indicates a direct link between controlling agricultural surplus in rural areas and forming a powerful, often rebellious, landowning class that could challenge urban-based royal authority. By the 10th century, these feudal lords had become so influential that they interfered with royal succession. The Dāmaras, who were essentially wealthy villagers turned territorial lords, established fortified residences in the countryside, which, like medieval castles, became centers of power from which they could defy the king's authority (Ray 1970, pp. (88-89). Trade and Market Supplies: Towns and cities depended on rural areas for supplies. The markets in urban centers, such as the semi-legendary town of Narapura, were kept full of supplies by the highroads leading to them. 8 This shows the dependency of urban populations on agricultural and other products flowing in from the countryside (Ray, 1970, pp.95-92).

Findings

This research paper presents ancient Kashmir as a region characterized by a rural-urban continuum, where rural villages, small towns, and cities were interconnected through social, economic, and administrative ties rather than existing as isolated entities. Agrarian production, particularly rice cultivation supported by an advanced irrigation system, formed the economic foundation that sustained the urban centers. This agricultural surplus enabled a non-agricultural urban population of administrators, merchants, craftsmen, and priests to thrive and funded extensive urban projects, including the construction of capital and temples. Cities such as Srinagara functioned as political, economic, and religious hubs, strategically located to facilitate trade and communication via rivers and roads, and served as centers for markets, religious institutions, and administrative control. The integration of Kashmir into broader trade networks is evident through the import of salt and silk and the export of saffron, with urban nodes managing these exchanges under the supervision of the state. Religious life spanned the rural-urban spectrum, with urban monasteries and temples complemented by remote mountain religious sites linked by the movement of religious figures and pilgrimages, thus forming a continuous religious and cultural landscape. The state established a bureaucracy that tightly controlled both rural and urban economies through taxation, revenue collection, and market

regulation, employing officials at the village and town levels to ensure the flow of resources to the state and urban elites. This administrative apparatus extended to urban commercial and domestic affairs, reflecting a comprehensive governance system. The rise of feudal lords, known as Damaras, stemmed from their control over agricultural surplus in rural areas, enabling them to accumulate sufficient wealth and power to challenge royal authority, highlighting tensions within rural-urban power dynamics. Overall, the prosperity of urban centers depended on rural productivity, while rural areas were politically and economically influenced by urban institutions, creating a dynamic and interdependent rural-urban network. This complex socio-economic system reveals ancient Kashmir as a deeply integrated society, where economic, political, and cultural exchanges continuously linked the countryside with urban life.

Conclusion

The study of ancient Kashmir highlights a closely connected rural-urban continuum, where economic, social, religious, and administrative ties link villages, towns, and cities. The agricultural surplus from rice cultivation supported urban growth and specialized populations. Cities such as Srinagara served as centers of political power, trade, and religion, integrating local and regional markets under state control. Religious institutions bridged rural and urban areas, while the state bureaucracy managed resource flow and market regulation. The rise of powerful rural feudal lords revealed tensions within this interdependent system, illustrating ancient Kashmir's unified socio-economic and cultural landscape.

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