

CHAPTER 6

URBANISM IN MALDIVES: A DISCUSSION

Our understanding of the origins of Urbanism in Maldives islands is limited due to lack of archaeological investigations in the region. Further, corroboration of archaeological data with that of literary data is also very limited. The available data, which includes evolved cultural remains that appear from the very beginning of the settlements, suggest that the first colonizing of Maldives was done by migrants either from Sri Lanka or Southern India. The presence of exotic resources, such as, money cowrie, turtle shells, and fibre products attracted the temporary settlers to establish resource procurement camps. The lack of evidence for antecedent cultures strengthens the aforesaid hypothesis. It is possible to assume that the first urbanisation process in the region coincides with the arrival of Buddhism, which is very well testified by the occurrence of sepulchral mounds of Buddhist character. At this juncture it is difficult to propose that if the missionary spirits of Buddhism served as a stimulant towards the development of urbanism or vice versa, wherein the evolved resource management centres invited Buddhism as a spiritual practice. Most of the explored and excavated Buddhist ruins in Maldives suggest that Buddhist institutions functioned here till 1153 century CE.

6.1 Buddhist Architecture in Maldives Islands

When we examine the vestiges of Buddhist architectural remains in Maldives islands we observe few differences from those seen elsewhere. These differences may be attributed to geographical and ecological factors abetting independent developments in relative isolation. As far as independent innovations are concerned, Maldivian Buddhists adopted local resources such as the use of coral stone masonry for their constructions. Such evidences are seen at sites in Kaashidhoo, Nilandhoo, and Gan Islands, where Buddhist architectural elements have been excavated. The excavated remains constituting different units meant for religious practices exhibit elaborate planning. By observing these remains, the presence of the local genius of its makers and its adaptability to the regional physical and cultural ecology appears unmistakably displayed. This is evident not only in how the Buddhist cults were expressing their ideological positions through assimilating local beliefs and traditions, but also in how they shared their genius with other regions of the subcontinent and beyond.

The analysis of structural remains indicates that the early inhabitants of the Buddhist monastic sites of Maldives islands made use of different types of religious architecture

indicative of a long term and diverse investment. Features like congested layout in a small area shows influence of architectural planning from Sri Lanka and Indian mainland as similar architectural complexes can be found at sites like Kantarodai (fig 6.1) in Northern Sri Lanka and Ratnagiri in Orissa. The main raw material used was the locally available coral stone, which suggests convenient construction strategies utilised for the development of ritual structures by local inhabitants.



Figure 6.1 Buddhist Site in Kantarodai, Sri Lanka

Such elements also point to the possible role of Buddhist monks as elites and ‘intellectuals’ that is necessary for the urban administration. The aforesaid proposition is validatable as the monuments of other contemporary South Asian faiths are scantily represented. .

6.2 Spatial Distribution of sites

The distribution of the archaeological sites in the north, central and southern part of the island shows that there was an inclination to expand the bounds of the settlements towards north along the coast. The existence of the large Buddhist monasteries in the Kashidhoo and Gan in the eastern part of the island indicate that there were a number of urban centers that had established in the hinterland area along the coast, which supported it. During the field survey 38 sites were located in 30 islands that fall within 15 atolls .The extension of the settlements along the coast and its hinterlands was vital for optimum exploitation of resources.

6.3 External trade

Comprehensively, the cultural development of the early urban phase of the Maldives islands can be seen as an interface of communities *via* long-distance commercial connections of the Indian Ocean and South Asia. The distinctive feature of this cultural phase is the advent of

the vigorous rendezvous in foreign trade. The presence of two Roman coins and glass beads from excavations are indicators of foreign trade. Archaeological evidence reveals that most of the items acquired by the local people through external trade were prestigious and expensive goods. Apparently most important among them were the glass beads, beads of semi-precious carnelian and agate stones, glazed pottery and imported earthen wares, for example the Red Polished Ware. The items exported from Maldives are still debated, although a reading of the literary accounts in the form of travelogues suggest items such as money cowrie (*Monetaria moneta*), fibre products and tortoise shells was exported until the collapse of the industry in the nineteenth century.

The earliest coins recovered from the excavations in the Maldives islands are Roman coins which were originally minted and circulated within the Roman territory during the period of 90 BCE. These coins were indisputably carried to Maldives by the traders. .

The ancient settlement expansion of the Maldives has revealed that the early communities had infiltrated into the floodplain by the later part of the third century CE. The results obtained from excavations of the archaeological mound at Kuruhinna Tharagaadu endorse that there was a migration of population into the area after the third century CE. Typically the presence of the Red Polished Ware and carnelian beads strongly suggest that this migration has a principal western Indian peculiarity, and was successively mixed with some cultural traits of south and central Indian regions. Such links were largely influenced by the developing activities of the Indian Ocean trade at that time, where the Konkan coast of the subcontinent played a pivotal role in it. However, it appears that the emergence of new groups was, to some amount, prominent in altering the structure of the prevailing institutional background of the contemporary society.

The sea-faring activities in the Indian Ocean in the ancient times have made a deep impact on the rise of urbanism in Maldives. Such activities were the chief source of stimulus for the populace migrations to the island.

6.4 Urbanism in Maldives

The archaeological, spatial and textual references propose development of urban centres in Maldives islands. The territorial expansion of the ancient settlements all over the islands shows the political integrity of the island during the Buddhist period. The archaeological record of Maldives in many ways refutes the understanding of the concept of socio- cultural and political orders, phrased as “Urbanism”. Assessing the identity of the aforesaid urbanism

using the existing models of Childe (1950), Erdosy (1995), Coningham (1995) and Dhavalikar (1989) is not easy in the case of Maldives.

Studies by Coningham and others (2007) suggest that the evidence of religious centres in the form of monasteries and temples even if in smaller size indicate the influence of greater economic and political power than larger villages and towns. The available archaeological evidence at Maldives suggests that the cultural history of Maldives islands began with the sudden appearance of Buddhism. Nevertheless the principal character of Buddhism as the main cause of ideological connection in the area is obvious. Buddhism served as a centre for connecting differences in the society linking multifarious and complex social and economic anomalies that existed in the social life of the Maldives. Based on observations elsewhere in South Asia, it is likely that Buddhist monasteries gradually transformed into economic redistribution centres.

There is considerable evidence that the layout of many cities in East and Southeast Asia were designed to be cosmograms or at least to physically represent some important perceptions (Wheatley 1971). Even when cities were not planned to replicate such sacred ideologies, many were regarded as sacred centres. Such cases caused the emergence of pristine state (Cowgill 2004). So, as per the archaeological evidence, the settlements in Maldives do not have a model or any prior experience with process or consequences of Urbanism. The conditions under which the Maldives islands emerged can be considered as being of a relative prosperity, or even affluence.