

THE ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN CENTRES IN  
MALDIVES ISLANDS

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Maldives, a group of islands located south west of India and Sri Lanka, occupies a significant position in the archaeology of South Asia. The geographical position of these islands and the presence of specific resources such as money cowrie, tortoise shells and fibre produce to set up resource procurement camps. Subsequently, once the trade got intensified, these islands began to serve as possible transit camps for the mercantile communities and also witnessed the arrival of organised religions such as Buddhism. These developments led to coming of established of semi-administrative mechanisms, to regulate the affairs of the society. Although such processes are difficult to perceive in the archaeological record, an attempt has been made in this thesis to identify such processes which resulted in the urbanisation of these islands and the interaction networks with other regions of South Asia and beyond.

Archaeological investigations of the role of islands in the process of urbanisation of a given region have been limited. These limitations are primarily limited due to the inherent problems associated with distinct landforms, which necessitate the departure from conventional archaeological methodologies and making compromises in the sampling strategies. In the present context, the Maldives are constantly threatened by climatic factors, which very often leads to the loss of archaeological data through erosion and submergence of landforms. Nevertheless, the present research has shown the utility of undertaking studies in isolated landmasses and evaluate their role in the urbanisation of South Asia. Although archaeological interest in the region is seen from as early as 1800's, these studies are mostly descriptive and have primarily discussed upon the artifact finds, with a goal to reconstruct their cultural histories (for instance, Bell 1940; Carswell 1976; Forbes 1984; Romero- Frias 1999; Skjølsvold 1991; Mikkelsen 2000). Although inherent with shortcomings, these studies have revealed that the Maldives islands were occupied during a Buddhist expansion in the centuries around the BCE/CE transition.

Within this context, the main scope of this work lies in corroborating the evidence obtained from previous investigations, literary traditions and evidence obtained from

fresh surveys by the investigator, with an aim of assessing the suitability of the application of previous models of urbanism in the Maldivian context. The surveys undertaken by the investigator focused upon the Buddhist archaeological sites situated in the north-central, central, and southern regions of the Maldives. Further, a detailed assessment of the recovered ceramic material culture and objects of art was undertaken to reconstruct the nature of exchange networks and cultural interactions with other parts of the world. Such an approach enhanced our understanding of the impetus behind urbanisation and the continual cultural changes in the island societies. The other significant objectives addressed in the thesis include: (1) When did the Urbanisation in Maldives islands occur? (2) Exploring how does Maldives Island reflect urbanisation? And, (3) what is the cultural locale of the islanders?

During the course of the present research, extensive explorations led to the documentation of 38 sites in thirty islands in fifteen atolls. From this survey it was interesting to note that a great majority of the activity areas were religious in nature and a majority of them are simple mounds with limited surface scatters of artefactual remains. An examination of the spatial distribution of the sites within the area revealed that they were closely located to reservoirs of coral stones and cowrie shells. The ceramics collected from the explorations were sorted, recorded and described based on their identifiable attributes. Most of the ceramics found were red-brown in colour, ranging from fine to coarse texture and appears to be from the immediate vicinity either from Sri Lanka or/and South India for which Maldives would have acted as a cultural annexe due to its geographic proximity.

A survey of the museum collections which housed previous findings was also conducted. These included 37 sculptures, and architectural fragments, which were classified as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms, ritual objects, and architectural fragments. The anthropomorphic figures recovered include Buddha sculptures, Bodhisattva figures, sculptures with demonic heads and *Gana* figures and the zoomorphic figures include a variety of images like the *makara*, lion and dog figurines. The material

used for manufacturing them is coral stone. Evidence of the prevalence of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism can be seen from the material culture. Mahayana Buddhism is mostly cult oriented and this characteristic may have inspired the flourishing mercantile communities and vice-versa. Most of the sculptures appear crude, whilst a few reveal high degree of craftsmanship and it is suggested that they have been manufactured by craftsmen who were not attempting to replicate the intricate architecture present on the mainland.

The archaeological record of Maldives in many ways refutes the understanding of the concept of socio- cultural & political orders, phrased as “Urbanism” by earlier scholars. Assessing the identity of the aforesaid urbanism using the existing models of Childe (1950), Erdosy (1995) Coningham (1995) and Dhavalikar (1999) is not easy in the case of Maldives. Studies by Coningham et.al. (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. Despite the presence of architectural monuments such as miniature stupas that are devoid of monastic complexes, perhaps reveal the compromises of the religious invaders while encountering the chieftains of different regions who regulated the resource procurement activities. These chieftains may have initially not established permanent settlements but held considerable influence through the establishment of seasonal camps. As and when they became familiar and acclimatised with this ‘tricky landscape’ that offered very selective occupational opportunities, an incipient level of occupation that suited the landscape emerged gradually. The limited occupational opportunities due to restricted raw material resources did not attract a greater variety of specialists, who could have manufactured materials of industrial nature. A lack of these components are noticeable in the Maldivian archaeology, which compels the researcher to question whether the term ‘urbanism’ as used elsewhere is applicable in its full spirit in Maldives. Therefore, the definition of the term urbanism in the Maldivian context is only applicable to this region and seen with a limited set of parameters. It may also be noted that replicating this model in every atoll also has its own limitations. The model of development of urbanism in

Maldives is culturally visible even today, where the people of Maldives exploit the available resources from unhabituated islands by defining it as 'theirs' and establishing their authority. This living model would further make one think that it is a continuation of the same that brought urbanism to Maldives from the neighbouring landscape such as Sri Lanka and South India.

The concept of religion for the early inhabitants of Maldives, though archaeologically invisible, may have imbibed a combination of animistic, totemic and shamanic elements, similar to that of the indigenous tribes of Sri Lanka and Southern India. Organised elements of spiritualism may have been brought by the Buddhist communities, who communicated their ideas to the society in the form of miniature *stupas*. The contemporary religious developments of Southern India and Sri Lanka continued to influence Maldives, which are represented by art pieces that draw inspiration from established art traditions in India and Sri Lanka, to cite an example, a terracotta plaque carrying an image of Buddha.

Despite the various limitations, the present study is significant the light of increasing growing threat posed by climatic factors affecting landmass (National Adaptation Program of Action: Republic of Maldives 2007). It highlights the archaeological potential of the region, towards understanding the role of islands and trans-oceanic trade in the process of urbanization, particularly in the South Asian context.

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