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## Chapter 6

### Towns, Traders and Craftspersons

- **Medieval towns**
  - Medieval towns were based upon the functions which they performed. The types of towns included temple towns, administrative centres, commercial towns, port towns and centres of craft production. At times, all functions were combined in a single town as well.
- **Administrative centres**
  - Thanjavur, the capital of the Cholas, was an administrative centre. It was located on the banks of the river Kaveri. King Rajaraja Chola built the Rajarajeshwara temple, designed by the architect Perunthachalan, in this town.
  - There were palaces with *mandapas* or pavilions besides the temple. There were also barracks for the army.
  - The town consisted of markets selling grain, spices, cloth and jewellery. Water supply for the town came from wells and tanks. Weavers and sculptors also carried out their occupations in this town.
- **Temple towns and pilgrimage centres**
  - Temples were central to the economy and society. The rulers built them to demonstrate their devotion to deities.
  - Land and money were granted to temples to carry out rituals, feed pilgrims, priests and celebrate festivals.
  - The wealth of the temple was used to finance trade and banking. A large number of priests, workers, artisans and traders settled near the temple to cater to the needs of the temples and the pilgrims. This led to the growth of temple towns completing the process of urbanization.
  - Prominent temple towns were Bhillasvamin (Madhya Pradesh), Somnath in Gujarat, Kanchipuram and Madurai in Tamil Nadu, and Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh.
  - Pilgrimage centres like Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh) and Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu) also developed into townships. Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer attracted pilgrims from all faiths.
- **Small towns**
  - Large villages grew to become small towns, which were in existence across the entire subcontinent from the eighth century onwards.
  - The small towns had market streets for different kinds of artisans such as potters, oil pressers, sugar makers, toddy makers, smiths, stonemasons, etc.

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- People came from distant places to these towns to trade in horses, local articles and products like salt, camphor, saffron, betel nut and spices like pepper.
  - Rights to collect tax upon such trade were granted to temples by *samantas* and *zamindars*.
  - **Big and small traders**
    - Several traders formed associations to negotiate prices for their goods and products.
    - Trading guilds to protect the interest of traders existed in South India from the eighth century onwards – the most famous being the Manigramam and Nanadesi. These guilds traded extensively both within the peninsula and with Southeast Asia and China.
    - Prominent trading communities were the Chettiars and the Marwari Oswals. Gujarati traders like the Hindu Baniyas and Muslim Bohras, engaged in trade with the ports of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, East Africa, Southeast Asia and China.
    - Arab, Persian, Chinese, Jewish and Syrian Christian traders conducted their business on the towns of the West Coast. Spices and cloth were the most important articles traded from India. These eventually reached European markets and attracted European traders to India.
    - The communities Panchala or Vishwakarma, which consisted of goldsmiths, bronzesmiths, blacksmiths, mason and carpenters, were essential to the building of temples, palaces, big buildings, tanks and reservoirs.
    - Weavers such as the Saliyar or Kaikkolars emerged as prosperous communities, making donations to temples. Crafts related to cloth making became specialized.
  - **A closer look: Hampi, Masulipatnam and Surat**
    - **Hampi**
      - The fortified city of Hampi was central to the rise of the Vijayanagara empire.
      - The architecture of Hampi was distinguished by arches, domes and pillared halls with niches for holding sculptures. The buildings had well-planned orchards and pleasure gardens as well.
      - Temples were the hub of cultural activities and dancers performed before the deity, royalty and masses in the multi-pillared halls in the Virupaksha temple.
      - The Mahanavami festival was one of the most important festivals of Hampi.

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- The city started declining from 1565 AD after the defeat of Vijayanagara at the hands of Deccan Sultans.

- **Surat**

- Surat was a centre of trade with the west, particularly West Asia, during the Mughal period. It was a cosmopolitan city consisting of people from all castes and creeds.
- The Portuguese, Dutch and English had their factories and warehouses at Surat in the seventeenth century.
- The main article of trade in the city was cotton textile which was famous for its gold lace borders called *zari*. It had a market in West Asia, Africa and Europe.
- The city was a centre of banking houses of moneylenders. Surat *hundis* were honoured in the far-off markets of Cairo in Egypt, Basra in Iraq and Antwerp in Belgium.
- The causes of the city's decline were related to the decline of the Mughal empire, control of sea routes by the Portuguese and the competition from Bombay.

- **Masulipatnam**

- The city was made populous and prosperous because of the fierce competition among trading groups like the Golconda nobles, Persian merchants, Telugu Komati Chettis and European traders.
- The Qutb Shahi rulers of Golconda imposed monopolies on the sale of textiles, spices and other items to control trade from the East India Companies.
- Once Golconda was annexed by Aurangzeb in 1686-87, Masulipatnam declined by the eighteenth century as it lost out on trade once the European traders moved to Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.

- **New towns and traders**

- The demand for spices and textiles in Europe and West Asia led to the formation of the East India Companies to conduct trade in India. The English emerged most successful among the Europeans in this endeavour due to their naval power. Ultimately, they established political influence through trade.
- Crafts related to textile industries developed as the demand for textiles increased.
- The independence of craftspersons declined during this period. Weavers could not sell their own cloth or weave their own patterns as they were dependent on the orders of European agents.

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- The cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras developed during the eighteenth century. Crafts and commerce also underwent major changes as merchants and artisans were moved into the Black Towns established by the Europeans in these cities.