



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

HISTORICAL CITY HASTINAPUR

KEY WORDS:

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Hastinapur kingdom, though lost in the mists of time, holds a central place in the religious history and mythology of India. The name is found in some of the most ancient religious scriptures of India and even today continues to reverberate in millions of Indian homes through its association with all the great religions that originated within the Indian subcontinent. Hastinapur, in the ancient past, was the capital of the kingdom of the Kurus. Being a great city of political power as well as being a centre for trade, it was fought for by many kings and dynasties, out of these the most famous being the epic battle of Mahabharat. Hastinapur is one of the most revered Jain pilgrimage centres in the country. The Great Buddha had visited Hastinapur, as per ancient Buddhist records, and Bhai Dharam Singh, one of the Panj Pyaras of the Great Guru Gobind Singh, hailed from Hastinapur. The mound of Hastinapur was scientifically excavated for the first time by the famous archaeologist Dr. B. B. Lal between 1950 and 1952. His report holds a lot of relevance even to this day. There has never been any proper survey of Hastinapur since then except for our survey dated 23rd April, 2011. Dr. Jyoti Prasad Jain had written an excellent article on Hastinapur in the book Mayrashtra Manas in 1971 which covered interesting facts concerning its name, geography as well as history.

RISE OF THE KURU JANPAD

As described earlier, after the age of the Rig Veda and the decline of the cities of the Harappan cultural complex (mature Harappan phase), there was a period of flux followed by a period of re-organisation of the Rig Vedic tribes creating the janpads or mahajanpads (provinces) of the classical age of Indian civilisation.



Ancient manuscript depicting Lord Krishna Courtesy: Shahzaad Rai Research Institute, Buraot



Geographical location of Hastinapur

One such janpad or province was formed by the merger of the Bharata and Puru tribes, which came to be called the Kuru janpad. This Kuru janpad became the first major political centre of the Indian subcontinent in the post-Harappan period with its capital at Hastinapur.



1. Coin, silver, obverse, Hastinapur. The elephant symbol of the kingdom is seen here Courtesy: Mr. Amit Rai Jain.

2. Coin, silver, reverse, Hastinapur

Courtesy: Mr. Amit Rai Jain



Hastinapur. A terracotta seal and metal coins with the elephant symbol from the mound

Courtesy: ASI, Meerut. Photo Dr. Amit Pathak. 2011



Hastinapur. Human head, terracotta

This ancient Kuru province (as also designated in chapter) appears to have extended between Satluj in the west, covering both banks of the by now dried up ancient Saraswati upto the upper course of river Ganges in the east. The river Yamuna flowed through the centre of this region. This ancient province therefore encompassed the modern day regions of northern and central Haryana to the west, Delhi in the centre and the upper Ganges – Yamuna Doab in the east (presently, Meerut and Saharanpur administrative divisions). The land lying between river Ganges and the Shivalik hills also appears to have been part of this Janpad, which presently are Dist. Bijnor of Moradabad division and plains of Dist. Hardwar (state of Uttarakhand).



Karn Temple, Hastinapur (Later Mughal - Maratha - Early British period)



Pandureshwar Temple, Hastinapur (Later - Mughal - Maratha - Early British period)

CAUSES LEADING TO THE RISE OF THE CITY STATE OF HASTINAPUR

If we see from today's perspective, Hastinapur does not lie on any major road or trade route, rather it is a closed pocket where all motorable roads end, the township being surrounded by forests

and the river Ganges. For a person thinking with a modern perspective it is difficult to imagine how this place was so important in ancient times to have continued to be the capital of the strategically located Kuru kingdom for hundreds of years.

To understand the strategic location of Hastinapur in ancient times which made it an important centre of political and economic power of the ancient world, we must understand a few facts –

1. The primary highways in ancient times were not roads, as today, but rivers which formed the main highways for movement of goods and people. The roads would be unsurpassable during many times of the year because of rain and derogatory weather conditions. During all these times, rivers formed the most reliable mode of surface transport. Even medieval mythical stories in India which describe merchants travelling between cities and kingdoms talk of them using boats as their main mode of transport (as in Satyanarayan Katha).

2. The main line of transport and communication from the Punjab plains to the Gangetic plains and from here to the eastern parts of India probably traversed Panipat, crossed the Yamuna and then went on to Hastinapur which was probably the main embarking station for goods and people coming up – stream on the river Ganges as well as going down – stream to the eastern lands. Hastinapur may have formed the most important river port of the upper Ganges river for many centuries. This was probably because most of the region further north must have been heavily forested in ancient times.

3. There was a relatively high density of human population in the Ganges – Yamuna Doab region even in ancient times. This was because of the excellent soil quality of this region, ample rainfall, ready availability of portable water and good weather conditions creating an agricultural surplus as well as being conducive for keeping a large livestock.

All the above factors – direct main east-west trade route, large local population, agricultural surplus with resultant economic prosperity and the main upstream river-head port on the Ganges must have made Hastinapur one of the most important and prosperous city after the decline of the ancient settlements along the Saraswati.

According to Pliny and also according to Peutingerian tables, the royal road from Indus to the point of confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganges (modern Allahabad) passed through Hastinapur Asiatic Researches, Volume IX page 229 - 'But the royal road, according to Pliny, from the context; and more positively according to Peutingerian tables, passed through Hastinapur; ...'



Statues of Pandavs at Pandureshwar temple, Hastinapur PROBABLE CAUSES LEADING TO THE DECLINE OF THE CITY STATE OF HASTINAPUR

The decline of Hastinapur appears to be associated with natural disasters leading to migration of its kings and their entourage to Kaushambi, a site close to the junction of the Ganges and Yamuna. According to ancient texts, an attack by red locusts on the crops, very heavy rains and subsequent flooding of the Ganges leading to complete devastation of part of the city, all led to the final decline of the city state of Hastinapur.

It is also important to understand why Hastinapur never rose up

again as an important city on the Ganges and was nearly lost in time. There is a possibility that Indraprastha (Delhi) had risen with time as an important city as it had a second direct line of Kuru kings ruling over it. After Hastinapur was destroyed by natural disasters and its kings migrated to other lands, Indraprastha must have arisen as the most important city of the Kuru region as well as the primary centre of political power for this province in view of it being ruled by a direct line of Kuru kings.

To reach the Ganges for trade, travel or religious purposes, Garh Mukteshwar was closer to Delhi than Hastinapur. It appears probable that Garh Mukteshwar now became the main northern port on the river Ganges, pushing Hastinapur further into oblivion.

THE HASTINAPUR CITY STATE ACCORDING TO CLASSICAL TEXTS

Ancient lore describes Hastinapur as a very large city spread over many kilometres. From its description in ancient texts, Hastinapur does not appear like a single city, but more like a 'city – state'. The main town of Hastinapur appears to be surrounded by many smaller towns and villages, all linked together to form a single large administrative unit. This administrative unit was the capital as well as a part of a much larger province called Kuru janpad.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF ANCIENT HASTINAPUR ACCORDING TO CLASSICAL TEXTS

The overall spread of this city, according to ancient manuscripts, was 21 yojan¹, thus the overall spread of this ancient city state would be about 168 miles or 270 km. It can be logically inferred and also analysed that the whole city was not spread throughout this large area, but this large radius included many smaller towns and habitations that were present all around the city and were directly governed by it. These satellite habitations must also have been service providers to the main centre of Hastinapur as can be inferred from the traditional description of Hastinapur and these centres given in ancient texts.

THE HASTINAPUR CITY STATE IN CLASSICAL TEXTS

There are at present a series of mounds in Hastinapur, some having been built over but some lying preserved as they were for thousands of years. The ancient city lies buried under these mounds and an excavation of a small area had been undertaken by the Archeological Survey of India under Dr. B. B. Lal in 1950 – 1952. The ancient city, according to his report, was spread for a much larger distance than the mounds themselves and evidence of pottery was found all around the mounds on the flat ground also.

The main centre of Hastinapur thus appears to be near the modern town of Hastinapur in Dist. Meerut. As inferred by Dr. B.B. Lal and given in his excavation report, its area of occupation was quite extensive in ancient times compared to the size of the mounds that are visible today.

According to myths, at the north-western extreme of the Hastinapur city– state was situated Varnavrat (Barnawa, Dist. Baghpat) and at its northern extreme was situated Shuktal (Dist. Muzaffarnagar). On its south-west was 1 situated Indrapur (Ahar in Dist. Bulandshahr) and at its southern extreme was situated Pushpavati (probably Pooth in Dist. Hapur) on the banks of river Ganges, which was said to be the flower garden of the city.

According to local legends, the present day village of Behsuma (ancient name Bhismasuma, Dist. Meerut) was its treasury, Gajpur was where elephants were kept and the horses were kept at Kharkhauda (Dist. Meerut). Cows were kept at present day Makhanpur and the town of Mawana (Dist. Meerut) was the main gate of the city and its fort. Muzaffarnagar - Saini, situated on the road between Meerut and Mawana, was its military outpost.

It is said that Mayrashtra (Meerut city, page), Garhmukteshwar (page) and Parikshitgarh (page) were its main satellite towns.

Interestingly, as can be gleaned from the above description, all

these places exist even today, though their names may have changed with time and usage, but with many of them retaining their original root word within their sounds.

Another interesting fact is that most of these places have remains of ancient civilisation buried under modern habitation or in the form of mounds, a preliminary exploration of these sites links them to the 'Painted Grey Ware' period, further excavations may probably link all these sites to the 'Ocre Coloured Pottery or OCP' level.

Harappan settlements have been recently found in many parts of Western Uttar Pradesh and the presence of 'Copper Hoard' implements along with mature Harappan pottery has been a landmark achievement of the Sinauli excavation (Dist. Baghpat page) and proves the antiquity of many sites where these implements of ancient copper were found with OCP (page).

VARIOUS NAMES OF THE CITY COMMONLY CALLED 'HASTINAPUR'

As delineated by Dr. Jyotiprasad Jain¹, a number of names of Hastinapur have been used in different ancient Indian texts out of which about 24 variants of the name of this city are extant. All these names are derivatives of one of the three primary words - Gaj, Hasti and Nag. These are -

1. **Gajpur (Gaiur, Gaynayar, Gajahvya, Gajshavya etc).** - The presence of a lot of elephants in this region during ancient times gave it this name (Gaj in Sanskrit means elephant).
2. **Hastinapur (Hastinpur, Hastinagar, Hastinahvya, Hastigram, Hasti-nagpur, Hathinaur, Hathnapur etc).** - A descendant of Bharat, Hasti, son of Suhotra, gave the city its name of Hastinpur which later got converted to Hastinapur.
3. **Nagpur (Nagahvya, Nagshavya etc).**

This name is derived from the Naga people who ruled this region and had a major impact on its history and mythology (see the story of Maharaja Parikshit page).

Other than the above three variants, two other names for this ancient city had been in use in ancient times. These are—

4. **Brahmasthal according to a Jain Text.**
5. **A sandivat according to a Buddhist Text.**

Hastinapur is mentioned in Greek records and Talmi left names of important Indian cities and in these this city was called Bastinora (Hastinora).

During the Mughal period, Abul Fazal Allami, Akbar's historian and minister, has described Hastinapur as 'an ancient pilgrim centre on the banks of the Ganges'. Within the kingdom of Akber, the region around Hastinapur came under the Delhi suba within Meerut dastur (see chapter). This dastur had six mahals (parganas) in it, Hastinapur being one of them. Hastinapur itself was divided into two pattis called patti Kauravn and patti Pandavn, the two pattis having the same name even today.

KANVASHRAM, DIST. BIJNOR

This place is near Rawli town and lies near the 'sangam' of river Malin with Ganges or the place where river Malin enters the Ganges. In Abhigyan Shakuntalam it is said that king Dushyant of Hastinapur fell in love with Shakuntala, the daughter of Kanv Rishi while hunting in a forest. He gave her a ring so that he could identify her when they meet. By mistake Shakuntala dropped the ring in a pond where a fish ate the ring.

There is a temple in village Mohandia near here where according to legend exists the temple pond where Shakuntala had dropped her ring, though obviously there cannot ever be any historical validity to this legend.

Mr. Satish Jain informs the author that he had discovered ancient artefacts at this site during his visit to Kanva Ashram, proving the antiquity of this location.