

Sirpur-An Important Trading Centre of South Kosal

– Dr. Anil Kumar Pandey

In the present paper, I have made my humble effort to throw light on a very important trade centre of Chhattisgarh (also known as South Kosal) during ancient and medieval period. Recent excavation at Sirpur established the fact that it was an organised and well maintained trade centre. A huge structure of ruined market complex is unearthed recently. We have sufficient evidence of metal works (Gold, Iron, Bronze etc.), stone works, pottery, health care, glass works, bead making etc. A large number of granaries are also found here. Sirpur situated on the bank of Mahanadi, was an important port, and merchant from various places like Banaras, Allahabad, Surat, Cuttack and also from South India came for trading here.

I have divided my paper into four parts. In the first part, I have discussed about historical geography of Sirpur, in the second part about political history, in the third part about excavation works at Sirpur, and the last part is most important, which deals about town planning and trade activities at Sirpur.

Sirpur or Shripur- the town of the goddess of wealth, has been mentioned in ancient epigraphic records and dates back to a period ranging between the fifth and the eighth century A.D. Sirpur a small village on the right bank of Mahanadi (Lat-21° 25'N, Long 82° 11'E) in district Mahasamund of Chattisgarh state, was once a large town of considerable importance. Ensnconed in the lush-green vicinity of the Bar Nawapara sanctuary, it is about 85 kms from Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh. Sirpur, is all set to catapult to international limelight as the excavations and the rare archaeological findings, during the last one decade, prove that the region was educationally, culturally and economically much more developed.¹



Map of Chhattisgarh



Map of Mahasamund District

II

Sripura (the city of wealth), was once the capital of Mahakosala or Chhattisgarh. There is, however, no mention either of Vidheya or Kosala in the early Vedic literature. Their references appeared for the first time in the Satpatha Brahman. But exact relation between Kosal with its capitals at Ayodhya and Shravasti and Dakshina Kosala is not known.² From the epic episode of the marriage of king Dasaratha of Uttara Kosala with Kausalya, evidently a princess of another Kosala, it has been suggested that Dakshina Kosala was probably a colony of the Ikshvaku dynasty. From Panini's Astadhyayi (6th century B.C.) an inference can be made, that the Aryan culture did not penetrate beyond Asmaka country. But by the 4th century B.C., when Katyayana wrote his Vatrikas on Panini, the Aryans knew the South Indian people of Pandya, Chola, and Chera. Therefore, we can say that Dakshina Kosala came under Aryan influence sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C.³

Sripur was founded, according to the Ramaya?a, by Rama's son Kusa and known by this name until the 12th century AD.⁴ Tradition avers that Sirpur was the capital of Babhravahan who caught his father Arjuna's sacrificial horse let loose with a challenge and killed Arjuna in battle, the latter being afterwards revived by Krishna. The Mahabharat, however, places the scene of action at Manipur which is identified with Ratanpur, where also the story of the sacrificial horse is current.⁵

Emerging from the legendary period we reach the dawn of history in the middle of the 4th century A.D., when the great Emperor Samudra Gupta directed his attention to the conquest of the south, and the kingdom of the South Kosala,

the old name of Chhattisgarh, was the first country he conquered in his 'kingdom taking 'expedition.⁶ The Gupta period is regarded as the golden period of Indian history in the sense that Indian culture after crossing the Indian boundaries made a deep impact on Central Asia and Malaysia. Besides Buddhist monks and Brahmin priest, the merchant played a vital role as a carrier of this culture.⁷ It is evident from Samudra Gupta military expedition in South India that he brought under his rule Dakshin Kosala (Raipur, Bilaspur, Sripur), Mahakantar (eastern Gondwana) Sambhalpur in Orissa, Erandapalli (Ganjam district Orissa), Devarashtra (Yellamchili), Vizagapattan, Giri Kottura, Avamukta (old port of Neelapali in Godavari district), Pistapura, Kaurala (Perhaps Kollur lake near Pistapuram, Pallakka (Palakada Nellore district) Kusthalppura (Kuttalura in north Arcot) and Kanchi.⁸

The Allahabad Prasasti of Samudragupta carries information about his successful expedition of Dakshinapatha or Southern Campaign. He is known to have defeated rulers of at least six independent principalities. They are 1) Mahendra of Kosala, identified with South Kosala, (Chhattisgarh state and Sambalpur, Bolangir region of Orissa), 2) Vyaghararaja of Mahakantara (Part of Ganjam and Koraput), 3) Mantaraja of Kurala (South Kosala), 4) Mahendra of Pishtapura (Pithapuram in the Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh), 5) Daman of Erandapalla (the modern Erandapalli near Chicacole in Andhra Pradesh).⁹

Sripura, the capital of Dakshina Kosala, finds mention prior to the times of the Panduvamsins in the inscriptions of the Sarabhauriyas and it was king Sudevaraja (6th century A.D) of the later dynasty, who probably founded the city and gave it the status of second capital. Finally, the capital was shifted from Sarabhapura to Sripura either by Sudevaraja or by his successor Pravaraja.¹⁰ Though prior to this there might have been settlement at Sripura, but making it the capital led to its rise to prominence.

As many as six different dynasties witnessed their rise and fall in Maha-Kosala. The earliest dynasty is known from its copper-plate charters found at Bilaspur, Raipur and Raigarh. No name for the dynasty is mentioned and also they did not mention any date in a known era in their grants. As their capital was at Sarabhapura so the dynasty is known as Sarabhauriya. V V Mirashi suggests that Sarabharaja, founder of this dynasty, was probably the same person who is referred as the maternal-grandfather of Goparaja who is mentioned in Bhanugupta's Eran pillar inscription of the Gupta Year 191 (510 A.D.). But D C Sircar however suggests that Sarabharaja flourished from 461 to 480 CE and his son Narendra from 480 to 495 A.D. As some of their charters are found at Sirpur, it might be their second capital. Genealogy after Sarabharaja is Narendra, Prasanna, Jayaraja, Pravarasena Sudevaraja and Vyaghraraja. Sarabhapura is not satisfactorily identified. D C Sircar who edited their grants did not identify this city however many other scholars have taken that

Sarabhapura was near Sirpur only. Their inscriptions are only in their regional years hence their exact dates cannot be satisfactorily determined. However it is assumed that they started their rule in later part of fifth century A.D.¹¹

The next dynasty is known from a single copper-plate grant which was discovered at Arang near Raipur. It was issued by a king named Bhimasena II however no name of his dynasty is mentioned. However he is described as Rajarshitulya-Kula to claim high dignity. The grant is dated in Gupta Year 282 (601 A.D.) and issued from Suvarnanadi (present Son river). Usage of the Gupta Era suggests that either the present king was a subordinate of the Gupta emperor or his ancestors were paying obeisance to the Gupta emperors. Bhimasena II was the sixth descendent of the founder Sura. If we take 20 years for each king then Sura would be ruling in 510 A.D, and was contemporary of the Gupta king Bhanugupta. The genealogy of Bhimasena II is as follows: Sura, Dayita, Vibhisana, Bhimasena I, Dayitavarman II and Bhimasena II.¹²

Panduvamsis conquered Dakshina-kosala and ousted Sarabhauriyas or Bhimasena II. Two houses of theirs were ruling over this area. One of them is known from a single charter issued by a king named Bharatabala who was ruling over Mekhala (Amarkantak). The charter is issued in his second regional year and mentions donation on the bank of river Son. Nothing is known about his successors and it may be assumed that he or his successors were ousted by the Sarabhauriyas who rose in power again.

Another Panduvamsi family was ruling over Sirpur. Udayana was the first king of this dynasty. He was succeeded by Indrabala. Nanna I succeeded him and he in turn was succeeded by Mahasiva Tivaradeva. He was the most successful king of this dynasty. He extended his kingdom to Utkala, Kosala and other nearby states. He was succeeded by his son Mahanannaraja or Nanna II. His uncle, Chandragupta, succeeded him. His son, Harshagupta, was married to Vasata, the daughter of Suryavarman of Magadha. His son from Vasata, Mahasivagupta alias Balarjuna, ascended the throne after Harshagupta. Mahasivagupta was a powerful king and enjoyed a very long rule as his Lodhia charter was issued in his fifty-seventh regional year. Mahasivagupta ruled from Sirpur but whether his ancestors ruled from same place is not certain. Balarjuna's younger brother, Ranakesari, was in constant struggle with the Sarabhauriyas.¹³

The genealogy of the Sirpur family is recorded in an inscription affixed to the parapet wall of Gandheshwar temple at Sirpur. From an inscription in the temple of Gandhesvara, (affixed to the parapet there) we know five ancestors of Mahasivagupta, so that our inscription gives no additional information about the family, as it only takes us back to his grandfather. But verse 6 leads us to the important inference that Mahasivagupta's Grandfather Chandragupta] had an elder brother who was the king's commander in chief. This elder brother

cannot I suppose be any other than the Tivaradeva of the Rajim and Baloda plates. He was the son of Nannadeva, Chandragupta's father. Tivaradeva's inscriptions, were issued from Sripura and he is described as being the 'supreme lord of Kosala'. He had apparently no issue and his brother probably succeeded him. A second historical fact to be gleaned from our inscription is the discovery of one additional name in the line of Varma kings of Magadha, Suryavarma who apparently belonged to the Western Magadha dynasty. He must have been a contemporary of Chandragupta, to whose son Harshagupta he gave his daughter in marriage.¹⁴

Sirpur experienced sudden enhancement in the religious and monument building activities in the 7th -8th century A.D. under the Panduvamsins of south Kosala. More than ten temples were built under the royal patronage of Mahasivagupta Balarjuna. Vigorous building activities and religious vibrancy attracted pilgrims from various places to visit Sirpur. The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang, who visited Sirpur (then known as Shripur), wrote that it was ruled by a king who was Kshatriya by birth but Buddhist by religion. Hiuen Tsang talked of over 100 monasteries in Sirpur, inhabited by about 1,000 monks belonging to the Mahayana sect of Buddhism.¹⁵

Such massive building activities and the temples with their own requirements provided source of income to the residents of the city. Experts from various places were brought into the territory to accomplish the task of building within a short span of time, as most of the building activities were done during the reign of a single ruler Mahasivagupta Balarjuna who ruled for at least 57 years. Thus, Sirpur in the 7th -8th century became the cultural hub of the Central India.

III

It was up to 1872 that history had been keeping itself mum when Lord Cunningham, the then Director General of Archaeological Survey visited Sirpur and discovered the famous Laxman temple. Under the auspicious of the University of Sagar and financial assistance from the government of Madhya Pradesh, Dr. Moreshwar G. Dixit excavated two prominent mounds situated about a mile to the south to well known Laxman temple. The first site yielded the remains of two large Buddhist monasteries adjacent to each other. The second site was found to contain the ruins of several small structures including Viharas.¹⁶

This was the beginning of the unravelling of the long journey undertaken by Sirpur in the dark aisles of time. With this, Sirpur lay its body bare for continuous excavations since the creation of Chhattisgarh as a separate state in 2000. The latest phase of excavations was launched by Dr. A K Sharma, the then superintending archaeologist at ASI in 1999. Since last ten years, under supervision of Dr. AK Sharma, archaeological advisor to the Chhattisgarh

government excavation is still going and various new findings till preparation of final report of the excavation would definitely give a new dimension to the history of Sirpur, and Chhattisgarh.

The recent findings in Sirpur have pushed the history of Sirpur further back by about one thousand centuries. Among the findings, while the 8 ft tall image of Lord Mahavir testifies to Sirpur having been a centre of Jainism, the Buddha Viharas point to its being a centre of Buddhist learning. Exquisite sculptures and 1.2 metres-tall sitting monolithic Buddha image, a Toranadwar (welcome gate) and a unique pyramidal temple have all emerged from persistent excavations in Sirpur. Another big find was a Buddha stupa built by king Ashok (it is believed that Buddha visited Sirpur in the 6th century BC). A batch of five Shiva temples (panchayatana) found here is built on the highest platform found in the country so far. Experts claim that this temple was ruined during an earthquake in 1200 AD. Dr. Arun Sharma is particularly excited about the sandstone and mud stupa he excavated along with 79 other Buddhist images. This Ashokan stupa finds mention in Xuanzang's book. The terracotta model of the original stupa, too, was recovered from Buddha vihar. The Sirpur site has already revealed 256 mounds that include 100 Buddhist viharas, four Jain viharas and 108 Shiva temples.¹⁷ The latest in the series of archaeological finds here are two temple mounds - one dedicated to an eight-armed Chamunda Devi (Parvati) and the other, a yugla or twin construction, to Shiva. But most astonishing findings include materials from ancient grain market, iron market, metal market and even remains of ports on the banks of river Mahanadi.

Spreading over an area of about 4x6 kms, the site in Sirpur has really proved to be a veritable gold mine for historians, archaeologists and the common man alike. The land has always provided a hospitable climate for the peaceful co-existence of various religions and sects. One can see with satisfaction the growth and popularity of Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism, Tantricism, Buddhism and Jainism in this area in one time or another which could be possible only because of the high eclectic attitude of the various ruling dynasties of Dakshina Kosala in ancient and medieval period.¹⁸

IV

The ancient Sirpur was a city of almost 1.5 lakh residents.¹⁹ Sirpur was a vibrant, meticulously planned settlement with a secular culture and a thinking administration. Interestingly, the principles of vastu shastra seem to have been the touchstone for builders in ancient Sirpur. "There is not a single structure which is not in consonance with vastu. An interesting detail: pathways connecting the temples and residential units with one another."²⁰

The whole settlement of about 6.5 kms runs parallel to the mainstream of Mahanadi in the North -East. In south-west part of the settlement, an east-facing palace, spread over an area of 60x40 metres, seems to be the site's

epicentre. It's a huge structure. What we already know is that the palace was at least three storeys and that teak was extensively used in the construction. A unique finding: a ramp connecting the kitchen with the main hall in the palace. From excavation a Darbar hall, Manti's sitting room, garden, and King's and queen's rooms are found. The doors of rooms of King and queen open towards the river. The floor is made of black stone and roofs are of teakwood. We do not find the use of Khapra (Mud tiles) in the houses even the top floors were covered with stones.²¹

In the whole settlement, no South-facing house is found. Generally in public houses, there is a courtyard in the centre of the house. Around the courtyard, we find living rooms, kitchen and sitting room. Another noteworthy feature is the presence of a 'Bhandara-griha' i.e. a room on the south-western corner of the house which served as a granary as it has no door and was approached from ceiling. This tradition still continues in Chhattisgarh villages. The first room of every house was guest room. Kitchen is found in the North-West part of the house. The layout or the excavated buildings shows that the whole city was planned strictly following the norms of Vastu sastra, as none of the religious and residential buildings face south. All the residential complexes are double storied. Evidences have also come to the light that important buildings were fortified and had cow sheds in the west. Buddhist nunnery was also fortified and has its own tank. Each building had covered underground drainage system indicating high degree of sanitation in Sirpur. The finds show that a lot of thought went into laying out the city. The drainage system, for instance, which stretched 6.5 km along the Mahanadi, was designed in such a way that it kept the river clean.²²

It is hard to look at this sleepy village on the banks of the Mahanadi in Mahasamund district and imagine a bustling trading and religious centre flourishing there between the 3rd century BC to the 15th or 17th century AD. The inhabitants were mainly agriculturists. The land of Mahanadi belt is very fertile. Rice is the principal crop of the region. Trade developed due to surplus production of the crops.

People of this highly civilized society engaged in different trades apart from agriculture. From excavations we find antiquities which were prolific both in variety and quantity. The residents followed different professions like smithy, pottery-making, gold work, bead-making etc. The implements of all these artisans were found. Inscriptions found here clearly indicate that people from different regions used to visit here.²³

Sirpur was a major trade centre during ancient period, much before it became the capital of Dakshinakaushal in the sixth century. Sharma said another important archaeological finding is that of huge ancient market complex. This ancient market was apparently an active trade centre from the 3rd century BC

to the 15th to 17th century AD. Archaeological artifacts up till the 17th century—such as silver coins of Mughal period and Tamrapatra of Kalchuri era—were found during excavations. What really got archaeologists thrilled recently was the discovery of a batch of four silver coins and a terracotta seal with Persian inscriptions. "These belong to the Mughal period and one of them has 'bandremubarak-Surat' inscribed on it," says G S Khwaja, superintending epigraphist (Arabian and Persian) at the ASI's Nagpur office.²⁴

The market complex is spread in very large area and situated between Chamunda temple and (panchayatana) temple. The whole market place is in northern part of the city. Determination of the area of market complex is impossible till completion of excavation, which is still going on. At present stage the area covers around 200 metres width and 300 metres in length. In market complex each merchant group have a separate market zone. We find shops of grain merchant, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, potters, bead makers, physicians etc. About 80 feet wide road divide from east to west and north to south bisect the market complex in rectangular shape. There is a watch tower in the centre of the market complex, where both the main road crosses each other.



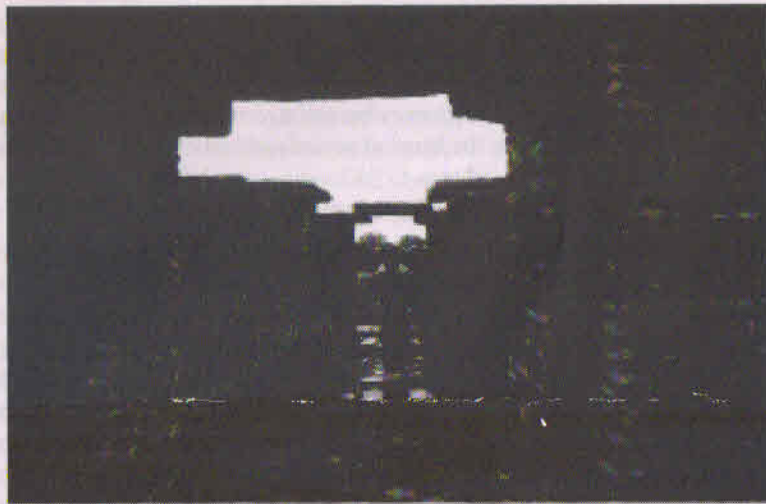
Ruins of Ancient Market



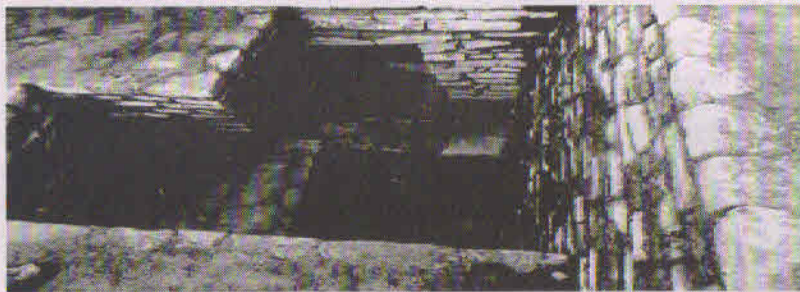
Public well in Market



Ruins of Ancient Market

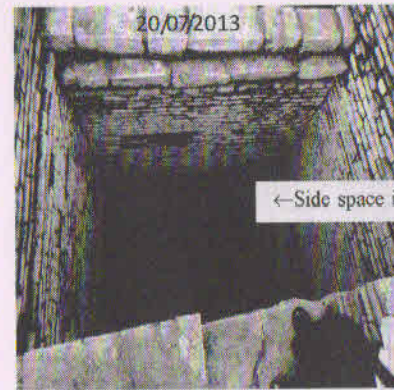


Ruins of Ancient Market

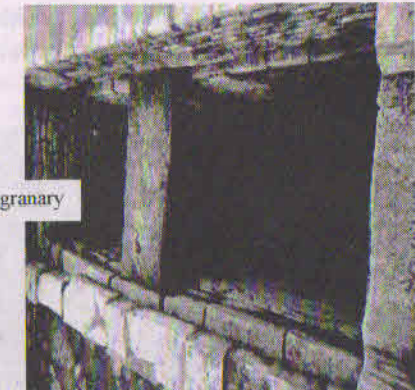


Underground Drainage System

Till now, forty eight granaries have been excavated from the site. These are well-constructed underground granary with the capacity of storing 34 quintals of rice each. The Size of each granary is 135cm X 240cm and depth is 2 metre. In adjoining room of the granary, there are stairs to come down to a square open space which serves as gate of the granary. The granaries are built in such a way that insects and rodents cannot enter. The granaries are also built underground to keep them cool. It is a public place because a lot of things belonging to public have been found. They were made from square pieces of white Limestone. The base of the granary is 25 layers below the cover of the granary. The archaeologists though hope to find more granaries as only one fourth of the site has been excavated yet. The granaries made of limestone had sliding covers. More importantly, they were secular, under the control of the ruler, and came in handy during droughts. 'Ayurvedic Snaan Kund' (an ancient



Underground Granary



Side room with stairs for entrance into granary

spa) is one of the richest archaeological sites. The size of this Ayurvedic Snaan Kund' is 1.80x1.80x0.60 metre in size.



'Ayurvedic Snaan Kund'



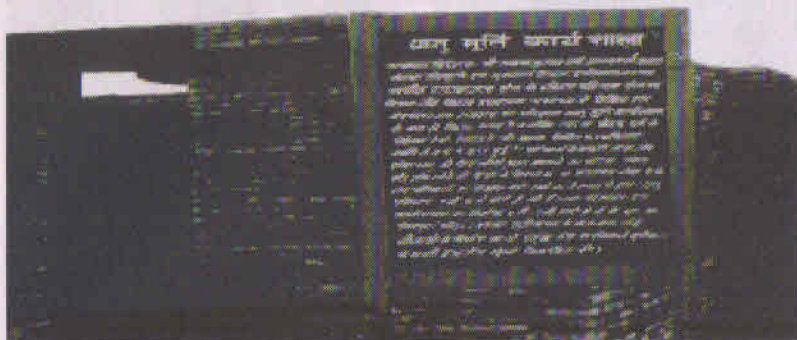
Another View of Ayurvedic Snaan

A public bath made of stone with concealed drains probably allowed for ayurvedic treatment. These were Kudon Ciktsa of various ailments. There was an underground pipe to drain out the water. It seems that ayurvedic medicines were also manufactured there.

Another important finding is the remains of an ancient treatment centre, with surgical facilities in Sirpur, dating back to 7th century. The unearthed complex, apparently a 10-bed hospital where ancient surgical instruments were also recovered, is located in front of a Vishnu Temple and at a most suitable place for a treatment centre as per Vastu Shastra.

After the excavations, we found ancient factories for making bangles, gold and silver jewellery and bronze statues. We have also found casts for

making these things. We find also moulds for making gold and silver ornaments, copper plates and stone inscriptions with dates have been found during excavations.



Cast for gold making



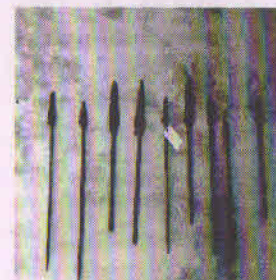
Materials related to metal works.

One room produced a complete set of goldsmith's tools, including pincers, a pair of tongs, a small hammer, casts used for making gold and silver jewellery, and even touchstone with marks of gold-testing.²³ Gold were imported from Iran.

Many of the bronze images were undoubtedly made locally, and amongst them mention may be made of a fine statue of Buddha plated with gold and having eyes set in silver; to add to the colourfulness, the lips were covered with copper to intimate the natural colour. In some bronzes, which were made by cire perdue process, the sand in the interior was still adhering to the metal. On the strength of the number of the images found in the excavation as also those accidentally discovered previously at Sirpur in a hoard, it can be said with fair certainty that an independent school of craftsmen flourished there, and their workmanship were greatly influenced by late Gupta plastic tradition. A circular copper plaque engraved with Buddhist texts deserves mention.²⁴

In one of the monasteries seemed to have been for Bhikshunis (for nun) a large number of shell and glass bangles were found. In the basement of an underground chamber in one of the room of the monastery was found an exquisitely carved miniature stupa in crystal and a gilt Vajra. A number of seals with Buddhist texts were found in a courtyard.²⁵

Sirpur made Iron material (found from excavation, presently in Sirpur)



Iron Spears



Diya(Lamp)



Locks With Keys



Clamp



Nails & other iron



Daggers

It was also known for iron statues, as there are iron reserves around the place. A large number of iron objects for domestic use like locks, hammers, lamps, nails etc; various agricultural tools and weapons are also found.

Various stone statues of God and Goddess, stone implements of domestic use, phallus (Shivlinga), animal's figures have been excavated.

At Sirpur, a large number of glass beads were found near crucibles containing glass batch, which was taken as an indication of a glassmaker's house being situated near the excavated area. In addition, the site yielded large quantities of glass slag and drawn wire, and numerous beads and bangles.

Traders arrived in this town from as far as Cuttack, Surat, Varanasi and Kanyakumari to do business. All faiths - Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism - coexisted in harmony here. Copper plate-and-stone inscription talks of the Hindu king Mahashiv Gupt Balarjun funding the construction of Buddhist and Jain Viharas.

Inland and waterways both means of transportation were in use. There is evidence to suggest that they used bullock carts with solid wheels. They also use elephants, horses and ass in the work of transportation. Sirpur had been an important port for the trade route. We find a stone landing point for boats near Chamunda temple. Being in the centre of India, Sirpur is said to have been an important trade centre. Various goods were sent to parts of India and Arab countries from here. The goods from here were sent to Karnataka, Gujarat, Cuttack and so.

Traders arrived in this town from as far as Cuttack, Surat, Varanasi, Allahabad and Kanyakumari to do business. It was on the way from a big port of Allahabad. It is also connected to Surat and traders travel by the way of Tapti and Mahanadi to Sirpur. Goods were also transported from Sirpur to Cuttack through Mahanadi. It was also connected to trade centres of south India. We have also traces of trader's guilds. But banking system was not prevalent there, and goods were exchanged through medium of barter.

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Govt. D.B. Girls College
Raipur (Chhattisgarh)