

# *The Phenomenology of Neighborhoods in the Early Historic Period of the Indian Subcontinent (3rd Century BCE – 4th Century CE)*

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## ABSTRACT

**Neighborhoods are places of social interdependence expressed in material forms of proximity represented by closely packed households, pathways, and open spaces. Archaeological remains provide the opportunity to analyze neighborhoods as the physical locale of urban residence that included daily routines of eating, sleeping, and self-care; regular acquisition of provisions; and interactions with other people. However, the experiences of neighborhood interaction were not unique to the urban form. In the Indian subcontinent in the mid-first millennium BCE, there were three configurations that brought people together into crowded physical and social spaces, each of which provided the opportunity for repeated, standardized, and routinized mutual interdependence: urban settlements, religious pilgrimage centers, and army encampments. [Urbanism, Households, Phenomenology, Mobility, Pilgrimage, Indian subcontinent]**

## Introduction

Cities are the largest form of human group, but they came into existence relatively recently compared to our species' long evolution in which people first lived in small hunter-gatherer bands and afterwards in modest agricultural villages. Although other species can thrive in groups of varying sizes up to millions of individuals in large undifferentiated masses (such as ungulate herds or termite nests that grow as a simple accretionary process), human social dynamics appear to require a compartmentalized approach to interaction. The formation of neighborhoods as physical and social entities enabled people to manage the complexities of individual and household life at an optimal scale, while still benefitting from the novel opportunities that exist only in the largest population centers. As a subdivided cell of interaction within a larger mass, neighborhoods were an essential component of populations larger than villages, whether their physical configurations were generated through bottom-up or top-down initiatives (M. E. Smith et al. 2015).

A model for the functioning of ancient neighborhoods as urban sub-units has been put forth by Elizabeth Stone, in which she suggests that Mesopotamian neighborhoods mimic the size of rural villages as an optimal size for a face-to-face community (1995, 240). Stone's observations enable us to consider the many ways in which people use physical communities as a stage for sustained interactions. As repetitive cellular entities, neighborhoods emanate from humans' biological need for shelter: as diurnal creatures, nightfall compels us to seek protection, warmth, and rest. While such needs can be addressed through the use of caves and overhangs, natural shelters are rare in the landscape. Thus from an early date our ancestors took matters into their own hands, constructing a variety of residential structures ranging from dispersed huts made of perishable materials to high-rise buildings made with concrete and stone. Regardless of the apparent solidity of architecture, however, people are rarely completely isolated from their neighbors: vibrations are transmitted through party walls and common floors; water and effluent obey the law of gravity from one

household to the next; and the very air carries smoke, odors, and sounds. The physical world created by people prompts the necessity of continued social interactions as well as continued construction to accommodate household dynamics over the course of occupants' lifespans. The resultant neighborhoods, fully intertwined with the physical world, can be characterized as "assemblages" that include people, objects, animals, plants, and the landscape itself (Harris 2013, 177).

### The Phenomenology of Neighborhoods

Phenomenology is an analytical technique through which researchers attempt to access humans' emotional and experiential responses to the world around them (Buttimer 1976). Archaeologists have applied the tenets of phenomenology to the built environment of the past, with a particular focus on the Neolithic and Bronze Age eras in which megaliths and other monumental constructions are interpreted as a distinct form of long-lived intentionality that continues to inspire those who encounter them (e.g., Harris 2013; Tilley 1994; Van Dyke 2008). An expanded perspective on phenomenology enables archaeologists to evaluate the social effects of mundane and routine activities in domestic contexts in which human-made structures are not merely expedient but represent an investment in style, social expectations, and household aspirations. While such investigations can be usefully applied to human groups at all scales, the application of a phenomenological perspective to neighborhoods enables us to investigate the building blocks of social integration when humans congregate in large numbers.

A neighborhood can be marked by or associated with an elite structure or a special-purpose building, but what is different from the enclave or ritual function of those large buildings is the understanding that the neighborhood is first and foremost a place of residence for a large number of people. Neighborhoods also encompass the functions of everyday life including food provisioning, bathing, recreation, social interaction, work, and purchasing, all of which are done on a regular and ongoing basis. We can thus speak of the phenomenology of neighborhoods as locales in which "place is about situatedness in relation to identity and action" (Tilley 1994, 18) and where "meaningful connections between the expression and content are socially created and maintained" (Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994, 466 citing Culler 1975). A phenomenology of neighborhoods is agentic, in the sense that people purposefully create their landscapes through the everyday actions of constructing houses, entering and exiting doorways, and using courtyards for work and play.

Neighborhood formation can be extremely rapid. Refugee camps and disaster-aid camps are dramatic modern examples of the ways in which large numbers of people assemble rapidly, often with a minimum of possessions, and immediately begin to address basic needs for food and shelter within a context of proximity and mutual interaction (e.g., Fawaz 2017; M. E. Smith et al. 2015). Voluntary field camps provide yet another example of the way in which neighborhoods as a social structuring principle are recreated when people move to new physical surroundings. In her historical study of London, Margaret Grieco (1995) examined the phenomenon of hops-picking as an annual exodus of people, particularly women and children, from London to the agricultural fields of southern England in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. She notes that entire neighborhoods were re-created in the fields, and that the settlements drew in the same provisioning networks of regular vendors from the city who came to set up shop in the temporary venues.

As Grieco's work shows, the development of consensus and tolerance among strangers was a skill whose emergence was not limited to urbanism but resulted whenever people congregated in a point-specific locale and had to negotiate spatial proximity. Other forms of mass movement include pilgrimage to religious and ritual venues, in which people focus on a fixed entity such as a temple or a river confluence but also move in and out while making neighbors in the context of temporary conditions. Individuals identify and integrate themselves into physical locales where they anticipate shared social values, class status, and specific variants of religious practice (e.g., Mack 2004). Although the focal point of the ritual experience is ostensibly the same for everyone who has made the journey, pilgrimages are far more than a "religious" experience and place on display social interactions that subsequently have an effect upon return to places of residence (Hickey, Staats, and McGaw 1979).

Armies also are not homogeneous masses but instead are divided into working groups of "companies" that have a physical presence in a landscape with expected configurations of eating, sleeping, and social interactions reestablished at the end of each day's march. While modern armies are constituted through heterogeneous mixing of individuals from different places who are grouped together, historical evidence suggests that pre-modern armies were more likely to have been subdivided by localist principles; in the American Civil War, for example, Bearman notes that army companies were organized along county lines in which "local elites organizing the company were placed in command and mustered in with the men they mobilized" (1991, 325). This strategy retained pre-existing social relationships that were

afterwards manifested in physical form time and again in army camps as they traversed the landscape.

The examples of refugee camps, pilgrimage venues, army camps and other locales of social interaction illustrate that the concept of a “neighborhood” does not emanate from the presence of a particular type of built environment but instead is a social concept that can be materialized in a variety of both temporary and permanent configurations. In neighborhoods, physical spaces are heritable and condition the actions and status of subsequent occupants: “a successful group modifies the political, economic, and social context in which later strategic groups must operate; an old group has set the rules (*Spielregeln*) of the game which newcomers must obey” (Colombijn 1994, 16, citing Evers and Schiel 1988). Proximity is tempered by chronology, however, as the bonds that come into existence through regular contact can fall apart when individuals move out of the neighborhood (Munro, Turok, and Livingston 2009). The experience of neighborhoods is thus conditioned not only by physical spaces and the built environment but also by time and the fluidity of social interactions (which may be further conditioned on the individual level by factors of age, gender, sexual orientation, reproductive status, and dis/ability).

In the course of the regular interactions that take place within the physically identifiable configurations of neighborhoods, individuals became increasingly familiar to one another, adding the scope of social relationships to even the most basic economic and logistical transactions. As seen in contemporary ethnographic examples of urban migration, individuals do not enter into mass-population locales indiscriminately but aim for specific areas in which they can immediately begin to access basic necessities by displaying their knowledge of appropriate behavior and social cues (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1969; Sanders, Nee, and Sernau 2002). The social experience of neighborhood integration, initiated at the level of individuals, constitutes a behavioral pattern that is carried over from one social scenario to another. Furthermore, as Harris (2013, 173) notes, communities and their constituent physical expressions are always “in a state of becoming” rather than being finished or absolute. In other words, we should think of neighborhoods not as a “built environments” but rather as “in-the-process-of-being-built” environments.

### **Neighborhood Formation in the Early Historic Period of South Asia**

As a socially structuring principle, neighborhoods were a critical component of the history of one of the ancient world’s most densely occupied and intensely urbanized re-

gions: the Indian subcontinent. By the Early Historic period (3rd century BCE to 4th century CE), there were approximately one hundred urban centers in South Asia, with a wide variety of forms that included walled settlements, port cities, and extensive hinterland market centers (Singh 2008; M. L. Smith 2006). In this period, people developed cities after more than a thousand years of hiatus in social complexity that came after the dissipation of the prior Bronze Age Indus culture. Although cultural continuities from the Indus are suggested to have been retained in the form of language and ornamentation, the Indus culture had less than a half-dozen urban sites all of which were abandoned and never reoccupied (Kenoyer 1999). Early Historic urbanism should be interpreted as an independent event that enables us to evaluate nucleated population centers as deliberate human creations after many centuries of small-scale and dispersed habitation.

The development of urbanism in the first millennium BCE in the Indian subcontinent coincided with the development of other distinct population configurations that appeared for the first time in the Early Historic period. New ritual practices in the form of Buddhism, Jainism, and other self-actualizing religious traditions were adopted in opposition to the traditional hierarchical priestly traditions of the preceding Iron Age (Fogelin 2006; Hawkes and Shimada 2009; Singh 2008). Buddhism and Jainism were both participatory movements in which the materiality of the religious experience was mediated by visiting specific places in the landscape where events such as the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment and First Sermon had taken place. Another development, about which much less is known, is in the form of large-scale armies that would have formed an essential component of territorial expansion and political aggrandizement, and in whose movements there would have been an expectation of social and physical units that were rematerialized each night while traversing the countryside.

In the Early Historic period, the concept of mass gatherings and densely-occupied residency thus occurred simultaneously in three different forms: in cities as economic and political centers, at monastic sites as pilgrimage and religious venues, and in military camps as strategic and administrative emplacements. The experience of proximate interdependence in religious, urban, and military venues provided a mutually reinforcing series of expectations about behavior, belonging, and social integration at a time when people gathered in much larger configurations than they ever would have experienced in the rural settlements that predated the Early Historic period. Mass gatherings of both ritual and secular form entailed many different types of social and logistical accommodation ranging from food provisioning to waste treatment, public order, symbolic architecture, and the

development and use of infrastructure. Pilgrimage and military experiences involved temporary accommodation and fluid population movements, while urban centers permitted the experience of permanent accommodation but with an equally dynamic movement of people.

The constant arrival of new individuals and households to both ritual and secular environments in the Early Historic period of the Indian subcontinent was a distinct contrast to the incremental, infrequent ways in which newcomers came into rural settings. For the first time in more than a thousand years, people in the Indian subcontinent entered into physical and social environments marked by the presence of a large number and proportion of strangers. When familiar faces were few, people would have used some other shared cultural marker (e.g., language, architecture, foodways, dress) as an entrée into the new social worlds represented by the dense mass of unrelated individuals with whom they interacted in ritual, urban, and military configurations. The built environment provided an architectural template for interactions, a template that was then populated with individuals and households that had to engage with each other for reasons of sheer proximity but also in the spirit of shared goals and outcomes.

### *Urban Centers*

Textual sources and archaeological remains provide evidence for the form and function of everyday life in urban environments in the Early Historic period. The kingly document known as the *Arthaśāstra* discusses the way in which craftsmakers who used fire were segregated within the city, presumably as a safety measure, and suggests that there was a legal sense of a neighborhood, given that “Causing harm to an entire neighborhood attracted a fine of 48 panas” (Rangarajan 1992, 41). The Sangam poetry of Southern India provides a slightly different perspective on urban life through the poetic description of urban activities in which population centers are described as having “many varied streets” where merchants lived and kept their goods. Different housing districts are described, ranging from “storeyed mansions” with tile roofs to “groves where ploughmen live” and huts thatched with coconut leaves (Chelliah 1985, 125).

Archaeological information about neighborhood-level social organization is more difficult to elicit from the Early Historic Period, as cities have primarily been excavated in very small areas with the aim of acquiring deep chronological sequences rather than broad horizontal exposures. One of the few sites with extensive horizontal excavation is Taxila in the northwestern portion of the subcontinent. In the early twentieth century John Marshall excavated an area measuring over one-half kilometer in length, provid-

ing the rare opportunity for the modern visitor to stroll the ancient streets where a variety of buildings including shops, households, and religious structures were unearthed. Long avenues and shared walls between structures indicate that the physical form of the city encompassed both fixed locations of interaction and residence, and corridors through which people would have moved in, through, and around the resultant neighborhoods. People passing from one part of the city to the next might have experienced varying levels of knowledge about different neighborhoods, what we might call ‘compartmentalized familiarity’ that emanated from the social relationships that they had with individuals living in those neighborhoods.

Research at the Early Historic city of Sisupalgarh in eastern India provides another dataset for neighborhood-level interactions. Excavations of a relatively high-status area, as assessed by the size of structures and the size of rooms within those structures (Lal 1949), can be compared with survey information across the entire site (M. L. Smith 2005) as well as with data from geophysical survey and additional excavated areas (Mohanty and Smith 2008) of more modest structures. The core of the city, which measures 130 ha in area, is surrounded by a rectilinear rampart wall and eight formal gateways; other monumental constructions include an elaborate construction of monolithic stone pillars near the central portion of the site and formal reservoirs. Geophysical survey revealed a gridded major street pattern with broad avenues coming in from the gateways and bisected by smaller lanes in a densely-occupied grid of structures (Mohanty, Smith, and Matney 2007).

The visible markers of distinctive architecture at Sisupalgarh, including the presence of gateways and streets that would have allowed for channeled, differential access, suggests that the city was experienced as a series of physical spaces that constituted neighborhood-level subgroups similar to the ones found in other ancient cities. In his discussion of Mesopotamian urban centers, Andrew Creekmore (2014:47–50) has proposed that many cities were “multicentric” on the basis of having more than one zone of monumental architecture, and thus had physical layouts that would have implicitly divided cities into different neighborhood configurations (see also the concept of “focal nodes” proposed for the Maya city of Chunchucmil by Hutson and Welch 2016, 108). Although monumental freestanding architecture at Sisupalgarh appears to have been limited to a series of monolithic pillar structures near the center of the site, the distribution of features such as reservoirs and stone-lined wells within the rampart walls similarly suggests a multicentric urban configuration that would have resulted in different neighborhoods of residence and daily interaction.

Early Historic urban neighborhoods did exhibit changes over time. At Taxila, the “grid-iron pattern, traditionally attributed to the city’s Hellenistic founding, had been highly modified over the life of the city” (Coningham and Edwards 1997–98, 53). At Sisupalgarh, a massive encircling rampart wall was built over an already-existing settlement, suggesting that the imposition of that major infrastructure project divided residents into “insiders” and “outsiders” as the result of what was likely to have been a top-down dictate (Mohanty, Smith, and Thakuria 2013, 62). These physical changes indicate that the stable-yet-fluid dynamics of neighborhood life were altered as people moved in and out and as physical structures were augmented, redesigned, or demolished.

### *Ritual Activities*

Prior to the Early Historic period, the dominant religious traditions were based in the hierarchical priestly rituals known from the Vedic Sanskrit literature (Roy 1995). By the mid-first millennium BCE, there was a ritual revolution that grew out of longstanding ascetic and renunciatory traditions that produced a number of distinctly new religious practices focused on individual action and meditation such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Ajivikism (Singh 2008).

Buddhism was the most widespread of the self-actualizing religious traditions, and became manifested in the development of very specific types of ritual architecture including monasteries to shelter monks and nuns, *chaitya* halls which were places of assembly and worship, and *stupas* (commemorative hemispherical structures designed to house physical relics). These three types of architecture tended to co-occur in locations that also served as pilgrimage centers and as way-stations for traders and merchants (Ray 1986). In some cases, the advent of Buddhist practices provided a focal point in the landscape for agricultural investments (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001); in other cases, Buddhist institutions capitalized on local pre-existing trajectories of growth (Coningham et al. 2013; Gilliland et al. 2013). Regardless of the population antecedents of religious locales, Buddhism ushered in new and distinct types of architecture that crafted the phenomenon of pilgrimage not only as a new social form but as one that had new ways of “containerizing” people (monasteries and *chaitya* halls) as well as providing new physical points of attention (stupas). The first Buddhist stupas appeared by the 4th century BCE and became widespread two hundred years later (Hawkes and Shimada 2009, xiii); excavations at the birthplace of the historical Buddha at Lumbini indicates that wooden temple architecture was, by the third century BCE, superseded by brick and stone structures that served

to “define movement and space” (Coningham et al. 2013, 1110).

Buddhist sites encompassed an ethos of mass gatherings through both pilgrimage and monastic residence. Textual sources and inscriptions reveal that there was an expectation that monks would retreat to monasteries in the rainy season, housed in substantial structures such as rock-cut caves or brick buildings (Ashraf 2013). Inscriptions at these sites show that donations by lay people, including merchants and villagers as well as royalty, served to finance the constructions (Fogelin 2006). As solid, long-lived architecture that still remains standing today, the ritual core of pilgrimage sites was augmented over time, but the temporary and ephemeral structures for pilgrims are quite difficult to elicit from the archaeological record. In an example of one of the few cases of outlying areas excavated around a Buddhist monastic settlement (albeit later than the Early Historic period), the efforts of distended pilgrim settlements are seen in the small-scale and inexpert constructions that constitute the vernacular architecture of devotion and around which would have been even more ephemeral pilgrim encampments (Smith and Hoque 2015).

### *Military Camps*

The Early Historic textual record and the presence of walled settlements, particularly in the northern portion of the subcontinent, attest to the concept of organized warfare of the type that would have elicited large-scale movements of troops across landscapes. Statements about the logistics of warfare can be found in the *Arthashastra*, which prescribes a contingent of non-soldier laborers to set up and support camps (Rangarajan 1992, 657). The army camp itself was a microcosm of physical organization that was already familiar to its inhabitants, about which L. N. Rangarajan (1992, 663) has noted that, “like the city, the camp also was divided by roads into sectors with the king in the innermost sector, protected by his own bodyguards.” Statements such as these provide insights into the mobile realm of armies and warfare, for which archaeological evidence is relatively slight; like other temporary locales, mobile army camps would have been very ephemeral.

The most famous incidents of documented warfare come from inscriptions. In the third century BCE, the ruler Ashoka noted that his conquest of the eastern region of Kalinga was marked by the deportation and death of more than a quarter-million people; even if the numbers are appropriately treated with caution, the indication of mass casualties and the 600-kilometer distance between Ashoka’s capital of Pataliputra located on the Ganges and the Kalinga region bespeak the necessity of a long

army march interspersed with overnight camps. Ashoka described the bloody conquest of the eastern region of Kalinga as the rationale for his subsequent turn to religious devotion as he “felt remorse, for, when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death, and deportation of the people is extremely grievous” (Thapar 1997, 255). Interestingly, his religious experiences led him towards the practice of what he described as *dhamma* or “righteousness” associated with Buddhist practice, and the historical record subsequently documents his support for Buddhist institutions to which he donated stupas and inscriptions, including at the site of the Buddha’s birthplace at Lumbini. As a pilgrim himself, Ashoka would have applied the same strategies of movement across the landscape that would have been familiar to him as an army commander and that would have included camp setups and mobile provisioning.<sup>1</sup>

The inscription of Kharavela, a ruler of the eastern subcontinent in the first century BCE, provides another example of long-distance military excursions. The inscription records that, in the second year of his reign, the ruler “sent to the West a large army consisting of horse, elephant, infantry and chariot, and struck terror to Asikanagara” (Sahu 1984, 335). These logistical experiences were repeated in the eighth year of the ruler’s reign, when he raised a “mighty army” for an attack on the city of Rajagriha (Rajgir, to the north); in the eleventh year he “shattered the territorial confederacy of the Tamil States” to the south; and in the twelfth year he went as far as the Ganges with an army that was a hundred-thousand strong (Sahu 1984, 338, 341, 342). Kharavela also made investments in the walls and gateway of his nearby city, indicating the simultaneous attention to the logistical organization of both permanent urban facilities and mobile field camps.

### Discussion: Multiple Landscapes of Neighborhood Formation

Archaeologists have tended to focus on urban neighborhoods as the most easily locatable proof of cellular substructures of population, but our understanding of social complexity is greatly enhanced when we consider how behavioral changes were manifested throughout a landscape and not merely in its most visible fixed nodes. Migration as a human activity results in a need for individuals and households to integrate themselves into groups, often at short notice. In ancient India as elsewhere, neighborhoods would have been the defining element of the transition from rural to urban life, and the physical and social mechanism by which people integrated themselves into novel mass-population configurations that included cities, pilgrimage

centers, and organized military campaigns. The simultaneous development of these three elements in the Early Historic period resulted in the opportunity for individuals to interact in rapidly configured groups in a variety of venues. Neighborhoods thus were not only a physical locale but also an easily replicable ideal. Once individuals had the experience of interacting with strangers in one type of place, the complex grammar of materially expressed behavior facilitated the creation of similar relationships elsewhere.

A phenomenological approach to neighborhoods enables us to utilize what are often ephemeral and overlapping types of data (including archaeological, architectural, textual, and epigraphic sources) to assess the makings of ancient social realms in which individual observations and actions combined to constitute the distinctive new lifeways associated with social complexity. Not every person in antiquity had the experience of multiple venues of neighborhood interaction, given the constraints on movement experienced along the lines of age, gender, and social standing. Nonetheless, even the experience of one such venue (urban, ritual, or military) provided a template for cooperation that could be actualized elsewhere in space and time. Angela Andersen (2012) has discussed the ways in which familiarity and the proximity of physical institutions resulted in parallelism in the medieval world, in which Buddhist and Sufi traditions made use of similar architecture, stories, and interpersonal dynamics of education, devotion, and public service. She emphasizes that individuals need not have engaged in or known about the subtleties of co-existing religious traditions to have understood how to use particular types of physical configurations to shape social interactions. Similarly, the presence of nested cells of interaction (what we could call neighborhoods) in *any* domain, secular or religious, provided a template for social groupings that could be actualized in a variety of different spaces.

### Conclusion

The workings of a city are not merely based on the presence of a small, commanding elite, but are predicated on the ability of large numbers of people to engage in the mundane transactions of daily life such as acquiring food and other needed goods while maintaining social relationships through regular contacts. The concept of the neighborhood provided both the physical and social locus of those interactions in a configuration that would have been larger than the family unit and smaller than the city as a whole. In the Early Historic period of the Indian subcontinent, the experience of urban life, ritual life, and military excursions all encompassed the same principles of behavior and interaction.

Individuals and households compartmentalized themselves within subgroups that not only provided a physical locus for sustained interactions among people who knew each other through the regular transactions of daily life but also provided a framework for the social, economic, and physical integration of new arrivals.

The capacity to interact within neighborhoods of strangers as a regular component of life probably was one of the key elements in the development of complex societies, and it became another indicator of the primacy of urban settlements as a necessary precursor to the development of the state. In complex societies, the creation of new social dynamics resulted not only in more people but also in the creation of psychologically manageable subunits of population, subunits that are archaeologically detectable in neighborhood form. Yet, even these “permanent” locales were fluid in their social dynamics: the physical configuration of houses and shops could be inhabited differently with the in-migration of new ethnic groups or social classes, and groups themselves could move from one physical place to another while keeping their social relationships intact. In the Indian subcontinent, there was a transition from temporary to permanent residential configurations (and sometimes back again) manifested in urban centers, in pilgrimage locales, and through occasional acts of territorial warfare, all of which were different manifestations of the neighborhood phenomenon.

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### Note

1. The logistical realms of secular, religious, and military activities have overlapped in other historical eras as well. Recall that Napoleon traveled with over 150 scholars and scientists along with 50,000 troops during his three-year military campaign to Egypt (Burleigh 2007).

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