

History of Mathura: A Historical Study of Its Urban Evolution, Cultural Syncretism, and Religious Significance in Ancient India

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Abstract- This paper explores the rich and layered history of Mathura which is one of India's oldest continuously inhabited cities known primarily as the birthplace of Lord Krishna. It examines Mathura's evolution from a prehistoric settlement to a major urban, religious, and cultural center. The study integrates archaeological findings, mythological narratives, and historical texts to trace the city's development through various phases—from the Paleolithic period to the Gupta era. Special focus is given to Mathura's strategic geographical location in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab, which enabled its emergence as a vital hub of trade, political power, and cultural exchange. The paper highlights Mathura's role as a confluence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, particularly during the Kushan period, and its contribution to Indian art through the Mathura School of Sculpture. It also delves into the Krishna Bhakti tradition and symbolic tales like the Kalayavana episode, which reflect deeper socio-political themes. Overall, the study presents Mathura not merely as a sacred city, but as a dynamic and influential center in the historical and civilizational landscape of India.

Keywords: Archaeology of Mathura, Braj Region, Ganga-Yamuna Doab, Krishna Bhakti, Kushan Period, Mathura, Mathura School of Art

INTRODUCTION

Mathura holds a very special place in the history and cultural landscape of India. Mathura is known as the birthplace of Lord Krishna because of this Mathura is also seen as a center of devotional traditions and also it is one of the most ancient continuously inhabited cities in the subcontinent.

Mathura is situated in the fertile region of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab the city has been a hub of religious, artistic and economic activities for over four millennia.

This paper seeks to explore the layered history of Mathura not just as a sacred city but also as a center of political resistance, cultural synthesis and urban development. Drawing from archaeological data, sacred texts and literary sources like the Harivamsha and modern scholarly research, the study focuses on two major parts: The evolution of Mathura's urban and cultural landscape from the prehistoric times to the early medieval period and The symbolic representation of foreign threats through the myth of Kalayavana (story of a powerful Yavana king who attacked Mathura but was ultimately lured by Krishna into a cave where he was burned to ashes by the gaze of the sleeping sage Muchukunda) which reflects deeper socio-political tensions between Brahmanical orthodoxy and foreign ruling influences.

The purpose of this paper is to understand how Mathura's cultural identity was formed and restarted over time particularly in response to the foreign invasions and ideological challenges. It also highlights Mathura played an important role in shaping regional religious movements and influencing broader patterns of Indian civilization especially in the Gupta and Kushan period. By combining both mythological narratives and historical evidence this study aims to present Mathura not just as a site of devotion but also as a living evolving cultural entity with deep historical roots.

Geography of Mathura

Mathura is located in the western part of Uttar Pradesh in northern India its found within the fertile Ganga-Yamuna Doab (a region situated between the Ganga and Yamuna rivers). This region has been one of the most agriculturally productive and culturally vibrant areas of the ancient India. The city lies on the western

bank of the Yamuna river which flows from north to south through the region and plays a vital role in shaping the areas ecology, settlements, trade routes and religious traditions.

The region of Mathura is a part of the broader Braj region which is considered sacred due to its deep association with the life and legends of Lord Krishna. The Braj region includes not just Mathura city but also nearby villages like Vrindavan, Gokul, Govardhan, Barsana and Nandgaon. These places are marked with Groves, Hills and Ponds that are connected with Krishnas divine activities (Krishna Leelas) making the landscape spiritually significant.

Geographically the land in Mathura slopes gently from north to south. The soil composition varies across the region. On the Yamuna side (the western bank) the soil is typically loamy and mixed with sand making it moderately fertile and suitable for dry farming. On the other side of Yamuna (eastern bank) the soil is heavier and more clay like which is good for intensive agriculture especially for the cultivations of wheat, mustard and sugarcane. This difference in the soil types has influenced the kind of settlements and farming practices adopted historically in each sub-region.

The presence of Goverdhan hills located in the southwest of Mathura city adds to the unique topography of the region. These hills made of sand stone and small rocks formations hold religious and cultural value. According to mythology Lord Krishna lifted the Goverdhan hill to protect the villagers of Braj from the wrath of the rain and storms God Indra. Other from their mythological importance the hills and their surrounding areas have provided evidence of early human settlement for example such as the Paleolithic tools further providing the areas long standing habitation.

Mathura's geographical position made it a natural crossroad for the major trade and travel routes in the ancient times. it connected the Gangetic plains to the northwestern and central parts of india and further towards Rajasthan, Delhi and the Himalayan foothills. The Yamuna River served as a vital waterway for movement and communication contributing to the city's rise as a commercial hub. Many ancient trade routes passed through Mathura linking it to regions like Agra , Bharatpur , Alwar , Kasganj and beyond . Mathura's location in a fertile and accessible region the city became a center of political power , religious

activity and cultural exchange over the centuries . its geography not only supported its economic and agricultural strength but also played a crucial role in shaping in religious identity and settlement patterns. The natural landscape of Mathura with its rivers, groves, and sacred hills became inseparable from the spiritual imagination of India.

Early Settlements and Archaeology of Mathura

The history of Mathura's human settlement stretches back thousands of years making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in india. Archaeological discoveries have revealed that the region was home to early human societies during the Paleolithic period as evidenced by stone tools found in the Goverdhan hills. These findings indicate the presence of the hunter and gatherer communities who lived near the Yamuna river and used the surrounding natural resources for survival.

The next important cultural phase in Mathura's archaeological record is the Orche Coloured Pottery (OCP) culture dating to around 1500 BCE or earlier. Sites like Aring, Gosna, Nobjhil and others in the Mathura region have yielded pottery fragments, copper tolls and habitation remains these artifacts suggests a transformation of people from a nomadic lifestyle to a more settled agricultural society. OCP culture is often considered as the predecessor to the later vedic age.

Following the OCP culture Mathura witnessed the rise of the Printed Grey Ware (PGW) Culture dating from around 1200 to 500 BCE. PGW is marked by fine grey pottery decorated with simple black patterns this period matches to the later vedic age and is closely associated with the Mahabharata era in traditional accounts. A large number over 205 PGW sites have been discovered in the Mathura region showing a dense and organized pattern of settlement. according to the Archeological reports averaging one site per 9 to 17 square kilometers. The largest of these was Mathura city itself covering an area of about 2500 by 1500 meters indicating its early importance as an urban center.

The next major phase was the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) culture which spread between 700 and 250 BCE. NBPW is identified by its glossy black pottery and is associated with the emergence of large

kingdoms (mahajanapadas) and the Mauryan Empire. During this time Mathura's urbanization increased and we get evidence by the fortified settlements, administrative structures and increased trade activity. The population grew, and more than 225 NBPW sites have been identified in the region, showing further expansion of civilization.

Mathura reached its peak during the Kushan period (1st–3rd century CE). The Kushan Empire known for its cultural tolerance and promotion of trade made Mathura a major religious and commercial hub. Around 345 Kushan era sites have been documented in the district—one every 10.5 square kilometers. This period saw the rise of the famous Mathura School of Art which produced high-quality sculptures of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain deities.

The urban layout, coinage, inscriptions, and art from this era indicate a sophisticated and multi-religious society. We find many artifacts of the Kushan period in the Mathura Museum in the current day.

Archaeological excavations on sites like Sonkh, Kankali Tila, and Ambarish Tila have revealed a continuous cultural sequence from the PGW era to the Gupta period and beyond.

The city's uninterrupted occupation and transformation through various historical phases reflect its importance not only as a religious center but also as a political and economic capital in ancient India.

Trade and Ancient Routes of Mathura

Mathura's geographical location played a very important role in its emergence as a major trade and cultural center in ancient India. It is located in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab with the Yamuna River flowing through it. Mathura was perfectly positioned to serve as a junction connecting various regions of northern and central India. Its location not only ensured fertile land for agriculture but also made it a natural crossroads for trade routes, pilgrimage paths, and political movements.

From ancient times Mathura was the heart of major overland trade routes that linked the Gangetic plains with Rajasthan, Central India, the Himalayan foothills, and even Northwestern India. These routes helped in the movement of goods, people, and cultural ideas across vast distances. Archaeological surveys have identified fourteen major trade routes spreading from

Mathura underlining its importance as a commercial hub.

To the east Mathura connected to the rich agricultural regions of the Gangetic plains. Ancient roads led toward Kasganj, Soron, and Ahichchhatra (Bareilly). These routes crossed rivers like the Kali Nadi and Ganga ensuring access to the eastern kingdoms and facilitating trade in grain, cloth, pottery, and religious items. The PGW and Kushan-era settlements along these routes Karnawal and Runakta demonstrate a continuous flow of goods and cultural exchange.

To the west Mathura linked to Rajasthan through routes passing Govardhan, Deeg, Bharatpur, and Alwar. These paths connected Mathura with the desert and semi-desert regions where traders moved items like metals, textiles, dyes, and ceramics. The route extending to Sikar was important for reaching the Shekhawati region and beyond. Southward trade routes connected Mathura with Agra, Dholpur, and Gwalior, and further into central India.

The path followed the Yamuna River, resembling the modern NH-2 highway allowed the transportation of goods by both land and water. Places like Achhnera served as nodal points for this southern trade corridor. In the north and northeast, Mathura had access to the Himalayan foothills via Aligarh and crossing points on the Ganga River like Karnawal. These routes enabled connections to pilgrimage centers and brought exotic goods like herbs, wool, and other mountain products. Another important route extended toward Delhi, Meerut, and Hastinapur, forming part of the historic Uttarapatha—the northern trade route that linked Mathura to Gandhara, Taxila, and the northwestern frontiers.

These interconnected routes not only brought commercial wealth but also facilitated the exchange of religious and artistic ideas. Mathura became a melting pot where Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions coexisted and thrived. Traders, pilgrims, and artisans brought with them new styles, languages, and cultural practices, enriching Mathura's urban life.

The city's strategic location, coupled with its access to river and road networks, made it a center of long-distance and regional trade, contributing significantly to its prosperity. Its role as a trade hub explains the rise of a cosmopolitan society and the development of the Mathura School of Art, which influenced artistic traditions far beyond the city's boundaries.

Historical Importance of Mathura

Mathura holds a very special place in the history of India as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Its origins trace back to ancient times, and it has been a significant center of culture, politics, trade, and religion for over 3,000 years. Situated on the banks of the sacred Yamuna River, Mathura rose to prominence due to its geographical location and its role in shaping the cultural and spiritual life of the Indian subcontinent.

According to ancient texts Mathura was the capital of the Surasena Mahajanapada, one of the sixteen major kingdoms mentioned in Buddhist and Jain literature around the 6th century BCE. The city was a key political center during this early historic period and was governed by powerful rulers. It had close connections with Magadha and other powerful states in northern India. The presence of the Yamuna and its fertile surroundings made Mathura not only a prosperous agricultural region but also an ideal location for trade and settlement.

Mathura's significance expanded during the Mauryan period (4th–2nd century BCE). Under Emperor Ashoka, Buddhism spread throughout India, and Mathura became a prominent center of Buddhist learning and art. Many inscriptions and artifacts from this period suggest that Buddhist monks and communities flourished here. The city was also an important administrative center under Mauryan rule. This period laid the foundation for the region's transformation into a cultural crossroads where various traditions merged.

The Shunga and Kushan periods marked the golden era of Mathura's history. Between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE, the city reached the height of its cultural and artistic development under the Kushan Empire, particularly during the reign of Kanishka. Mathura became one of the most important centers for the development of Indian sculpture and religious art. The Mathura School of Art, which emerged during this time, produced iconic images of the Buddha, Jain Tirthankaras, and Hindu deities. These sculptures were characterized by their distinctive red sandstone material and detailed carvings, and they influenced art styles in other parts of India and Central Asia.

Apart from art, Mathura was also a thriving center for religious harmony. It was a meeting ground for different faiths Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism all

of which coexisted and flourished here. Temples, stupas, and monasteries were built across the city, reflecting a vibrant religious life. The famous Katra Keshav Dev temple site, which is associated with Lord Krishna's birthplace, also gained prominence during this period.

In the Gupta era (4th–6th century CE), Mathura continued to flourish. The Guptas, known for their patronage of art and religion, supported the construction of temples and further enriched the city's cultural heritage. Many Hindu sculptures and inscriptions from this period suggest that Mathura played a central role in the revival and expansion of Brahmanical traditions. This was also the time when devotional worship of Lord Krishna gained momentum, transforming Mathura into a spiritual heartland.

Later, during the medieval period, Mathura saw the rise of the Bhakti movement, which deeply influenced the religious and cultural life of the region. Saints like Surdas, Vallabhacharya, and others made Mathura and the surrounding Braj region their spiritual base. This movement celebrated Lord Krishna through poetry, music, and dance, further strengthening Mathura's identity as the land of Krishna.

Although Mathura faced invasions and destruction during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal period, its cultural spirit remained unbroken. Even in modern times, Mathura continues to be a place of historical importance and religious devotion, drawing scholars, archaeologists, and pilgrims from across the world.

Mathura's Role in Buddhism and Jainism's Cultural Heritage

Mathura has long been a place of religious and philosophical traditions deeply influencing the development of both Buddhism and Jainism in ancient India. Though it is most famously known as the birthplace of Lord Krishna and a major Hindu pilgrimage center but Mathura's religious landscape has historically been far more diverse and inclusive. From the early centuries BCE to the Gupta period Mathura served as a vibrant center of Buddhist and Jain learning, art, and spiritual practice.

In Buddhism Mathura played a vital role in spreading the teachings of the Buddha across northern India. During the Kushan period (1st to 3rd century CE), the city became a prominent monastic and artistic hub.

Several Buddhist monasteries (viharas) and stupas were established in and around Mathura. The most famous contribution from this period was the emergence of the Mathura School of Art, which produced some of the earliest and most iconic images of the Buddha. These sculptures, often carved in red sandstone, depicted the Buddha in a human form, wearing a monastic robe, with a calm and serene expression. This marked a significant evolution in Buddhist iconography, transitioning from symbolic representation (like footprints or the Bodhi tree) to anthropomorphic forms.

Mathura's Buddhist art also displayed regional characteristics that distinguished it from the Gandhara School, which was influenced by Greco-Roman styles. While Gandhara figures had more Western features, Mathura's Buddhas were more Indian in form, with rounded faces and sensuous postures. These images helped spread the visual and devotional culture of Buddhism to other regions of India and Central Asia. Similarly, Jainism has deep roots in Mathura. The region is believed to have been visited by several Tirthankaras, and Jain texts refer to Mathura as a holy site. Archaeological evidence, such as Jain stupas, inscriptions, and sculptures, confirms the city's importance in early Jain religious life. Particularly during the Kushan era, Jain patronage flourished. Inscriptions from this period mention donations by lay followers and monks to Jain temples, indicating a strong and organized religious community.

The Jain sculptures from Mathura are notable for their detailed carvings, depicting Tirthankaras in meditative postures, surrounded by symbols like the chatra (umbrella), lions, and yakshas. These artworks reflect the values of asceticism, inner purity, and non-violence central to Jain philosophy. Many of these figures were found in places like Kankali Tila, an important archaeological site linked to Jain worship.

The coexistence of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism in Mathura reveals the city's pluralistic and tolerant spirit in ancient times. Temples, stupas, and monasteries often existed side by side, creating a rich cultural fabric. This religious harmony contributed to Mathura's legacy as a center of learning and artistic innovation.

Krishna Bhakti Tradition

The Krishna Bhakti tradition is one of the most

profound and emotionally spiritual movements in Indian history. Rooted in devotion (bhakti) to Lord Krishna this tradition emphasizes a personal loving relationship between the devotee and the divine. Over the centuries it has deeply shaped Indian philosophy, art, music, literature, and everyday religious practice.

The roots of Krishna Bhakti lie in the Bhagavad Gita a sacred text in the Mahabharata. In it Krishna as the charioteer of Arjuna speaks of devotion as the highest path to liberation. He assures that those who surrender to him with love and faith will attain eternal peace and union with the divine. This message laid the foundation for later devotional movements focused on Krishna as a personal god full of compassion, wisdom, and love.

The tradition flourished during the medieval Bhakti movement (8th to 17th century), especially in northern India. Saints like Surdas, Mirabai, Vallabhacharya, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu played vital roles in spreading Krishna Bhakti across regions. Each brought unique expressions to this devotion—Surdas through his soulful poetry of Krishna's childhood Mirabai through her songs of longing for Krishna as her divine beloved Vallabhacharya through his Pushtimarg tradition and Chaitanya through ecstatic devotional dance and singing (kirtan).

Grey Ware (PGW) phase to the Kushan and Gupta periods. Pottery, coins, seals, beads, toys, and tools were unearthed, indicating a thriving urban and commercial life. A central theme in Krishna Bhakti is the leelas (divine play) of Krishna especially those in Vrindavan and Mathura, where he is portrayed as a mischievous child, a charming flute-player, and a lover of the Gopis. These stories are not only symbolic but serve as metaphors for the soul's intense yearning for union with the divine. The most famous of these narratives is the Rasa Leela, where Krishna dances with Radha and the Gopis, illustrating divine love in its most exalted form.

Another significant aspect of Krishna Bhakti is its inclusive nature. It crossed barriers of caste, gender, and social status, allowing anyone regardless of background to access the divine through pure devotion. This was a revolutionary spiritual message in times of rigid social divisions.

Temples dedicated to Krishna, such as those in Mathura, Vrindavan, and Dwarka, became centers of this devotional movement. Daily rituals, music, and festivals like Janmashtami (Krishna's birthday) and

Holi (the festival of colors, closely associated with Krishna) continue to draw millions of devotees.

Literature and music have also flourished under this tradition. Texts like the Bhagavata Purana and compositions by saints contain rich poetic depictions of Krishna's life and teachings. Classical and folk music traditions, especially bhajans and kirtans, remain powerful mediums to express Krishna Bhakti. In essence, the Krishna Bhakti tradition celebrates divine love, surrender, and joy. It brings God closer to the human heart, not as a distant ruler but as a beloved friend, child, or lover. This emotional and spiritual connection has kept the tradition alive and thriving for centuries, making it one of the most cherished aspects of Indian religious and cultural life.

Archaeological Discoveries in Mathura

Mathura is one of India's oldest continuously inhabited cities and its archaeological richness proves its importance through centuries. The discoveries made in and around Mathura have helped historians and scholars understand the cultural, religious, and urban development of ancient North India. From prehistoric tools to sculptural masterpieces, Mathura's soil has revealed layers of its glorious past.

Excavations in Mathura began during the British colonial period. The most notable early work was done by Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), in the 1870s. He documented many sculptures and relics, especially from Kankali Tila, which turned out to be one of the richest Jain archaeological sites in India. Terracotta figurines, Jain Ayagapatas (worship panels), and inscriptions found here reflect the strong presence of Jainism in ancient Mathura.

Later, during the 20th century, further professional excavations were conducted by Indian archaeologists like M.C. Joshi, Daya Ram Sahni, at sites such as Sonkh, Ambarish Tila, and Jaisinghpura. These digs brought to light a continuous cultural sequence from the Painted The Mathura School of Art, which flourished especially during the Kushan period (1st–3rd century CE), was discovered through hundreds of red sandstone sculptures and statues. These included early images of Buddha, Tirthankaras, and Hindu deities like Vishnu and Krishna.

These sculptures are unique in style strong, symbolic, and deeply Indian in spirit unlike the more Greco-

Roman-influenced Gandhara art.

Mathura also yielded a large number of inscriptions, written mostly in Brahmi script and Sanskrit, which mention donations by rulers, merchants, monks, and women. These inscriptions help us understand the religious diversity, temple patronage, and social structure of ancient Mathura. Some inscriptions even mention the Yavana (foreign) rulers, showing their interaction with local culture.

Another important discovery includes coins from various dynasties—Mauryas, Shungas, Kushans, and Guptas. The coins show how Mathura was a trade and economic center, connected with both Indian and foreign markets. Even in recent years, accidental finds during construction work or illegal digging have brought to light ancient remains. Sadly, many heritage sites like Gosna, Nobjhil, and Konkera have been damaged due to lack of protection and awareness.

These archaeological discoveries prove that Mathura was not just a religious city, but also a political, artistic, and economic powerhouse. The city's uninterrupted occupation, from the 1st millennium BCE to medieval times, makes it a rare historical site. Preserving and studying these remains is essential to understand India's ancient past and Mathura's central place within it.

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