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Trade and Commerce in Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

India has long been a trading nation, with precious goods such as spices, scents, valuable stones, jewellery, silks, muslins, and medicinal drugs etc. to offer the world since the Harppan era. The dockyard discovered in Lothal, Gujarat, gives unusually strong evidence of maritime commerce at the time. The Vedic economy valued both internal and exterior trade equally. Manufacturing activity was brisk throughout the Mauryan rule. The Mauryans had enacted rules and regulations on trade movement. The Kushanas made significant progress in the Indian trade and developed trading links with China, Rome, Sindhu, Sauvira, Kapisa, Gandharas, Puskalavati, Madhura, and Varansi. he Guptas not only expanded their eastern trade but also opened up western sea-borne trade, resulting in unparalleled economic success. The Pllas and Cholas established connections throughout southern India. Trade enhanced cultural interaction, resulting in the spread of ideas and cultural practices, notably in the fields of language, religion, and art.

Keywords: Trade, Commerce, Ancient India, Internal trade, External trade

I. INTRODUCTION

Trade is the acquisition, distribution, and exchange of goods. It has occurred for as long as people have needed or desired something that others had but they lacked. Bartering for commodities and trade in kind evolved into increasingly complex forms of exchange using commodity currencies like bronze or copper ingots or even cowry shells. Cows, shells and beads, and even other metals were employed as a means of exchange throughout the Vedic period. However, these were typically only useful for large-scale commercial operations, and smaller transactions necessitated the use of something else I.e. coins/ money. Ancient nations often introduced coins as a convenient means to pay warriors, but the concept rapidly expanded to civilian life.

Early Indian trade evidence dating back about three and a half millennia shows that the Indian subcontinent was recognised as a key commercial zone in ancient times. Economic activities can also be vividly seen in the public life of Indians in the stone age also (Piggott, 1950). Indian trade prospered in all forms from the beginning, whether it was restricted to domestic or long-

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distance external trade, and whether it was carried by land or water.

Trade in ancient India was mostly concentrated on luxury things such as precious metals, spices, and exquisite fabrics, but as shipping got quicker, more dependable, and less expensive, even commonplace items such as olives and fish paste were shipped over long distances. Ideas and cultural practices spread as a result of increasing interaction between civilizations brought about by commerce, notably in the fields of language, religion, and art. International trade resulted in the formation of trading emporiums, which frequently became colonies. As the struggle for resources and access to profitable trade routes became more intense, monarchs sought to steal the wealth of other nations and empires, which sometimes ended in battles.

There is evidence that marine trade persisted on a large scale during the Vedic (1500-800 BCE), Mauryan (c. 324-187 BCE), Kushana (approximately 30 CE-roughly 375 CE), and Gupta eras, as well as succeeding periods of south Indian dynasties such as the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Cholas. The slogan of Rig Vedic sailors was "May our ship embark to all regions of the globe." Similarly, narratives of sea trips, disasters, and missionaries moving overseas abound in Buddhist literature, especially Jataka stories. There were feeder land routes connecting places of production to points of export, such as sea ports, and vice versa. During trading, the feeder land routes served as both collecting and distribution channels.

II. TRADE AND COMMERCE IN ANCIENT INDIA

Nature has given an appropriate backdrop for Indian commercial activities. "Nature defines the direction of evolution, while man decides the rate and stage," writes Taylor Griffith. India is fortunate with the Himalayas to the north and the sea to the south. The archaeological evidence revealed that trade and commerce across land and water played a significant role in the evolution of economy in ancient India. The presence of the sea has helped in the expansion of business across continents.

Trade during the Harappan times

The Harappan civilisation had a thriving trade and commerce network both inside and outside of its borders. When urban civilization grew in towns such as Harappa and Mohenjodaro, India established trading and economic relationships with Sumer, Egypt, Oman, Bahrain, and other western Asian countries. The Harappans were known to be skilled seafarers, as indicated by depictions of boats on seals, tablets, and amulets. The dockyard unearthed in Gujarat's Lothal provides extremely strong evidence of marine trade at that period. The establishment of urban centres in the Indus Valley Civilisation coincided with the development of excess agricultural production, which was first noted in India with the rise of trade and crafts (2600-1900 BCE).

Around 3000 BC, trade began in Ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. Spices, gold, and textiles were among the commodities traded. Cities with a greater number of items to trade were wealthy. As civilizations grew in size, so did the number of individuals who required greater resources. One of the reasons for the development of trade and commerce was because of this. Because they traded diverse items based on the natural resources of the civilization's region, ancient towns connected distinct groups of people. The growth of commerce has an influence on communication, money, transportation, and cultural systems. Since the Harappan period, textiles have been one of the most important items in Indian trading. Textiles as trade products, like many other perishable materials, do not remain as evidence, but the few that do exist say much about their commerce. Textile trade evidence can occasionally be found implicitly in other sources. For example, the scroll headpiece of a Harappa clay figurine closely matches the emblem of a Babylonian goddess, implying trade links between the two lands. Babylon was an ancient Mesopotamian city. Another reference showed that clothing, as well as other commodities such as medicinal herbs, incense, scent materials, and so on, were routinely delivered to Mesopotamia from the eastern lands of Meluhha, the Sumerian term for the Indus civilisation. These products remained the item of trading in subsequent times as well. Spices and fragrances, valuable stones such as beryl, silks, muslins, and cotton were all in high demand in the Roman world from the 1st century A.D. The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, a manual produced by a Greek in the first century CE for seamen travelling between the Red Sea and the Bay of Bengal, also mentions clothing trade from India (Chakaraborti,1966). It is also mentioned about the export of very good quality muslins from the Ganga or Vanga area. This came most likely from the Tamruk (ancient Tamralipti) port in West Bengal's Purbi Medinipur district and Chandraketurgarh in the 24 Pargana district.

Chinese silk was imported into Kanchipuram and exported to Malaya from there. Kanchipuram was also a centre of indigenous silk manufacturing, therefore it's reasonable to assume that local silk was included in the route shipped to Malaya. Kanchi also produced enormous, gleaming pearls and unusual stones, which were swapped for gold and silk items. It suggests that silk fabrics played a significant role in Indian trade.

Trade during the Vedic times

The Vedic period is defined as the time period between 1500 and 500 BC. The Rigveda paints a picture of a community like this during the Pre-Harappan period. Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy. People's wants were limited. The villagers were well-versed in sowing, harvesting, threshing, and other agricultural seasons. The inhabitants were pastoral,

and the cow, as well as cows and bulls, were revered.

Trade and commerce were vital aspects of the early Vedic economy, which valued both internal and external trade equally. Trade was mostly conducted through a bartering system in which products were swapped for goods. We discover unique prayers in the Rig Veda for attaining wealth through seafaring interests. *Pani* was a merchant guild that supervised and controlled commercial activities. *Mana* was the medium of weight, and the car was an essential unit of commerce. With the integration of the Panis, a composite *Vaisya* class formed later on. Agriculture, trading, and livestock breeding were the occupations of the *Vaisya* class, according to several *Dharmasutras* (Srivastva, 1968). Brahmans were taking part in trade and commerce is also known from *Manusmriti*.

Several mentions of sea trips performed for business and other objectives can be found in the Rig-Veda. Varuna, the God of the sea, is attributed with knowledge of ship routes. The Vedic depictions of the Aryans' sea voyages and commerce activity attest to their commercial vocation. In the later Vedic period, there was marked change in the economic life of Aryans and importance changes in the trade and commerce can be noticed (Basu, 1925).

Trade during Mauryan, Kushana times

Manufacturing activity was brisk throughout the Mauryan rule, according to Greek sources, who mention the fabrication of chariots, carts, weaponry, and agricultural tools, as well as the construction of ships. Strabo mentions gold-embroidered dresses with valuable stones adorning them, as well as floral robes made of excellent cotton (muslin). Fine wines, colourants, glass vessels, costly silver vessels, singers and beautiful maidens for the harem, and the finest ointment were among the items imported into India, while the country exported fine silks, muslin, spices, perfumes, medicinal herbs, indigo, sandalwood, pearls, ivory, iron, steel, and so on (Mukherji, 1966). The Mauryans had enacted rules and regulations on trade movement, including the appointment of a superintendent of shipping (*naukadhyaksha*) to control waterborne trade, *mudradhyaksha* to oversee overseas trade, and a Superintendent of trade and customs (*panyadhyaksha*) to oversee overall trade regulation, including the collection of duties on commodities, according to the Kautilya Arthashastra. According to Kautilya, the Haimavatamarga (the route from Balkh to India via Hindukush) was utilised only for the trading of horses, woollen textiles, skins, and furs. Other products sold on the Dakshinapath or Deccan route were diamonds, precious stones, pearls and gold etc. According to the Arthashastra, the Mauryan administration was more interested in the affairs of industries and industrialists than it had been previously.

The northern (*Uttarapath*) and southern (*Dakshinapath*) land routes, which together formed "the Grand route of India," became the arterial trade routes for silk trade, along with their feeder channels, especially during the Kushana period (30 CE-375 CE), which connected China, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and European countries. The Kushanas made significant progress in the Indian trade and developed trading links with China, Rome, Sindhu, Sauvira, Kapisa, Gandharas, Puskalavati, Madhura, and Varansi (Srivastva, 1968)

Trade during Guptas and later period

Commercial activity flourished during the Gupta dynasty (3rd century CE- 543CE), leading in a better financial system led by a nagara shreshthi (chief banker). Taxes were collected at a higher rate than usual. Printers and weavers may have been obliged to pay a tax equal to half the price of their wares. The Jambudvipa prajnapiti, a Gupta-era document, describes eighteen ancient guilds, including silk weavers (pattaila), napkin dealers (ganchhi), calico-printers (chhimpa), and tailors (sivaga). The Mauryans traded mostly with the east through Kalinga ports, the Guptas not only expanded their eastern trade but also opened up western sea-borne trade, resulting in unparalleled economic success.

The wealth of the Roman Empire began to stream into India through the western coast ports of Broach, Sopara, Cambay, and Kalyan when Chandragupta II opened up the western trade. Arabs used to travel to the west coast to buy teak, medicines, perfumes, shoes, black salt, spices, indigo, textiles, muslin, and other items, and Indian goods were extremely popular in Arabian countries.

Between the 7th and 10th centuries in northern India, trade and commerce declined, resulting in the fall of cities and urban life in religion. The collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, as well as the collapse of the Iranian Empire kingdoms, contributed to a notable shortage of gold and silver coinage in North India from the seventh to the tenth centuries. With the establishment of a powerful and widespread Arab kingdom in West Asia and Africa, the situation in north India progressively altered. India was ruled by a number of mighty kingdoms throughout this period. Western India's Gujara Pratiharas, Eastern India's Palas, and the Decan's Rashtrakutas are among them.

Under the patronage of Chola rulers, trade and commerce blossomed. The Cholas established connections throughout southern India. They then connected Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and possibly China in north to the trade network. The Cholas, who rose to prominence in the 10th century A.D., gave a huge boost to international trade. Merchant guilds such as Manigramam, Nanadesis, and Ainnurruvar took part in sea-borne trade that stretched from the Persian Gulf

in the west to Indonesia and China in the east. Trading expeditions were sent by the Chola emperors to China. Cotton textiles, spices, pharmaceuticals, gems, ivory, rhinoceros horn, valuable stones, and fragrant items were the main products which remained in high demand in China during this period.

During the Chalukyan period, the Ayyavole guild, based in Aihole (Karnataka), travelled over the world carrying priceless items in their luggage. They made philanthropic contributions as a group. The banks of these guilds were so stable throughout the Rashtrakuta period that they inspired the greatest level of public trust.

III. CONCLUSION

In the end, it is reasonable to conclude that early trade mostly concentrated on luxury items such as precious metals, spices, and exquisite fabrics, but as shipping got quicker, more dependable, and less expensive, even commonplace items such as olives and fish paste were shipped over long distances. India has a right to be proud of its role as an essential and fundamental element of the worldwide silk route, which was a historic trade route that spanned from the 2nd century BCE to the 14th century C. Trade enhanced cultural interaction, resulting in the spread of ideas and cultural practices, notably in the fields of language, religion, and art.

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