

Trade Networks and Commercial Expansion from Early Historic India to Gupta Age

Anamika Pandey, Arti Gupta
[https://doi.org/ 10.61410/had.v21i1.269](https://doi.org/10.61410/had.v21i1.269)

This research paper examines the development and expansion of trade networks in ancient India from the Early Historic Period (c. 600 BCE) to the Gupta Age (c. 550 CE). It analyses inland and maritime trade routes, commercial institutions such as guilds, and the role of state policies in shaping economic growth. The study argues that trade networks were not only economic structures but also instruments of cultural exchange and political integration. The Gupta period represents the culmination of earlier developments, marked by extensive internal and external trade networks and commercial prosperity.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Economy , Trade Networks , Commercial Expansion
Early Historic Period , Gupta Age, Inland Trade , Maritime Trade,
Indo-Roman Trade, Guild System (Shrenis), Urbanization, Coinage
and Monetization.

Introduction

Trade has always been a fundamental aspect of human civilization, and ancient India was no exception. From the Early Historic Period, India developed extensive trade networks that connected rural production centres with urban markets and international trading partners. These networks expanded significantly under powerful empires such as the Mauryas and later reached a high level of sophistication during the Gupta period.

The objective of this paper is to examine the evolution of trade networks and analyse their contribution to commercial expansion. It focuses on both continuity and change in trade structures across different historical phases.

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."

-
- Student of M.A. Semester IV (History), Maharishi University of Information Technology, Lucknow
 - Asst. Prof. History, Maharishi University of Information Technology, Lucknow
-

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.

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 Tamluk (ancient Tamralipti) port in West Bengal's Purbi Medinipur district and Chandraketugarh in the 24 Pargana district.

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 Prac 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, 2189 International Journal of Law Management & Humanities [Vol. 5 Iss 3; 2186] © 2022. International Journal of Law Management & Humanities [ISSN 2581-5369] 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 (Srivastava, 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 source, 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.

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.

References

1. Early Historic Trade & Networks

- **Himanshu Prabha Ray**
“Early Historical Trade: An Overview”
Published in *Indian Economic & Social History Review*
▶ Discusses trade routes, coinage, guilds, and long-distance commerce in early India.
- **Ranabir Chakravarti** (multiple journal articles)
▶ Focus on merchants, markets, inland & maritime trade networks.

2. Trade, Markets & Merchant Activity (Extended Context)

- **Geetika Gupta**
“Markets, Merchants, and the State in Early Medieval Western India”
▶ Useful for continuity from Gupta to early medieval commercial expansion.

3. Comparative / Global Trade Context

- **Klaus Karttunen**
“India and World Trade: From the Beginnings to the Hellenistic Age”
▶ Explains India’s early integration into global trade networks.
 - **Anamika Pandey** ap156840@gmail.com
 - **Arti Gupta** artiofficialfeb29@gmail.com
-