

TRADE AND COMMERCE OF KUSHANA DURING THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA: A PROBE

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Abstract

The Geo-political situation of the Kushana empire made the north –western region of the country, the meeting place of the three civilization i.e. India, Chinese and western. Under the rule of Kushana, the northwest India and adjoining region participated Silk trade with China. Trade with Rome proved highly profitable for India. India received the price in the bullion. It also developed cultural contacts with western world. The Kushana became the ambassadors of Indian culture and civilization. The dynasty of Kushana opened the way for Indian civilization in Central and Eastern Asia. The Kushanas occupy a unique position in the history of India. Two hundred years and more of the Kushana ascendancy is a period of special significance in Indian history. The country once again was given political unity, kings and common followed religion of their own choice, trade and commerce flourished, new settlers joined in mainstream, and neighbouring countries relations close than before were cultivated.

Keywords: Kushana, Silk Road, Maurya, Roman, Parthian, China.

INTRODUCTION

The Kushanas occupy a unique position in the history of India. The country once again was given political unity, kings and common followed religion of their own choice, trade and commerce flourished, new settlers joined in mainstream. The cultural restoration, started during the reign of the Sunga, gained special patronage of the Kushana kings. Phenomena of trade are very ancient; and we met with reference to buying and selling, and exchange of goods and price from the Harappan period. A network of roads from early times connected India. However, as centralization advanced, it was found necessary to lay out vast roads in all directions linking up the various parts of the empire both strategically and commercially.

Long-distance trade played a major role in the cultural, religious, and artistic exchanges that took place between major centers of civilization in Europe and Asia. Traders used these routes for centuries. These trade routes used for the supply of raw material, foodstuff, and luxury goods. People moving from one place to another to conduct business transmitted new inventions, religious belief, artistic styles, languages and social customs as well as goods and raw materials.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this paper is how internal and external trade and commerce flourished in the Kushana period. The development of trade and the strengthening of economic ties resulted, above all, from the consolidation of the supremacy of the Kushana Empire, the expansion of agriculture and the growth of handicraft production. As is clear from the mass of archaeological material from various ancient sites of the period, trade between the Central Asian provinces increased greatly. Items of trade included products of handicrafts and agriculture, and both consumer goods and luxury articles. Consumer goods such as cereals, fruit, textiles, pottery, timber, etc. probably formed items of regular and extensive trade within the country, which demanded the minting of local coinages in different regions – Chorasmia, Margiana, Samarkand, Bukhara and Chach – serving as a medium of exchange in retail transactions. During the period under consideration, the rulers of different countries and provinces played an active role in international trade and enjoyed a monopoly of trade in certain goods. They used to dispatch their ambassadors with large quantities of merchandise and valuable gifts, and formed their own trading guilds.

1. Expansion of International trade during Kushana Empire:

Before the start of Christian era, there was expansion of international trade among five powers: the Roman Empire, the Parthian Empire, the Kushana Empire, the nomadic confederation of Xi-Ongnu and the Han Empire. The early century of the Christian era was a period of trade and commerce. Almost all-important trade centre of India were connected with each other through land or water channels. Some of trade routes and centre were connected with foreign trade routes and trading centres. Thus, entire peninsula formed a single unit, at least from the commercial point of view. Overland and sea routes begin to grow with foreign trade especially with the Roman Empire. The Indian literature, the Greek

and Latin traveller's accounts and archaeological evidence bear testimony to India's thriving commerce with the Western world. Routes play an important role in flourishing the regional culture within the country, as well as outside the country i.e. foreign. After the establishment of the Kushana kingdom, the Geo-political situation of the Kushana Empire makes the north-western region of the country, the meeting points of the three civilizations i.e. China, India and West Asia.

2. TRADE ROUTES:

During 2nd century, the Kushanas controlled the three main stretch of the great "Silk road". The first road of the two Seas, the Caspian and Euxina, secondly the road which trough passed Meru, Hecatomphylos, and Ecbatana, crossed the Euphrates and reached Mediterranean ports, thirdly, the Maritime route between Indian and Red Sea. More advantageous from the commercial point of view, the Silk route, which was passed through the Kushana dominions of Central Asia and connected it with China and the Western Asian provinces of the Roman Empire. It was through this route, the Chinese Silk passed on to the Roman world, and the Kushana might have extracted much money from the caravans passing through this route. The result was that north-west India, under the Kushana, became the main center of trade and commerce of the completely contemporary world leading to the enormous increase of Roman gold in the country as attested by the discovery of numerous Roman gold coins in India. The Kushana had full control over the Indus valley, Gandhara and Turkistan. They safeguard the major routes of communication, the northwestern route from Gandhara to the Middle East through Bactria and to China through Turkestan and the western route from Kandahar through Persia to the Mediterrian Sea. The trade was carried on the regions between Ganga, The Indus, The Euphrates, The Oxus, the Medeterrian , Caspian and Black-Sea.¹ Kushana kingdom comprised to whole of north Afghanistan, and its beyond. It touched, in the north and northeast of Chinese and in the west the Roman Empire. Under the Kushana, the country once again politically united, after Mauryas, kings and common followed religion of their own choice. Indian carried direct trade with foreign countries, especially with Roman Empire. Kushana Empire had a great share in the trade with Rome during 2nd century A.D.

3. ARTICLES OF COMMERCE DURING KUSHANA PERIOD:

The main articles of export of Kushana were precious stones, gold, silver, copper, tin, glass, cotton and silk cloth, timber, sugar and spices and wine among the imports ². The trade

was in favour of India, the import of gold on a large scale and issue of gold coinage by the Kushana kings, Wema Kadphises and his successors- Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva.³ The Buddhist and Jain literary sources provide evidence of the commercial activities of the Indian traders. The Pali Jatakas, earlier in date 5th -2nd centuries B.C., are replete with reference to merchants moving from one place to another and the customary number of 500 carts loaded with merchandise.⁴ Banaras and Saraswati appeared as important trading centres in the Jatakas. We after learn about the merchants travelling from east to west and west to east. Sea voyage and foreign trade are alluded to it. It is interesting to note in this connection that the Bharukacha (Broach), Baveru (Babylon), Suvarndip (Golden Island) and other places are mentioned in these stories in connection with maritime activities.

4. TRADE CENTRE OF KUSHANA:

The Buddhist works like Milindapanaho, Mahavastu, Divyavadan and the Avadanasataka, all composed in the first four centuries of the Christian era, give some idea of merchants and their activities. In the Milinadapanaho, Sagala is mentioned as a great center of trade (Nana-Putabhednam)⁵. The text describes in detail shops full of merchandise, dealing in Banaras muslin, Kotumbara, stuffs, cloth of different kinds, flowers and perfumes, jewels and similar other articles. It also mentions merchants' guilds, displaying their merchandise in markets. It is said that the city of Sagala was so flooded with money, gold, silver, copper and stone wares that it resembled a dazzling mine of treasure.⁶ It seems that from far off places like Scythia, Bactria, China and Vilate, Ujjaini, Bharukacha, Banara, Kosala and other border lands, Magadha, and Gandhara came and resided there.⁷ Evidently, the people must have come to the city with the intention of trade because, it commanded the land routes connecting India. On accounts of its position, the city of Sagala attracted not only from all over India but also from foreign lands. The details of trade and trade routes are given in Chinese accounts, which were written by Chinese travellers who visited in India for the purpose of Buddhist scripts and literature.

From Kashmir to the west important trade routes passed. These trade routes are known as the Silk routes during the first century of the Christian era. The Buddhist monk used these routes for the spread of Buddhist culture to the states of Eastern Turkestan to China. The Kushana conquests, trade opened up to the overland route to commerce between India and the Roman Empire. In Central Asia, trade had previously been mainly incidental and subject to attack of many savage tribes. The Parthians had done what they could to

control and organize it by levying tribute on the Roman merchants and by establishing trading stations, but they had not been able to control it Eastward. The existence of unified power in Bactria, the Kabul valley under the Kushana made it possible for a regular trade to be carried on between the Euphrates and the Ganga.⁸ The peace treaty which was frequently engaged in warfare was not broken for a half century⁹ and proved beneficial for this purpose. The discovery of the monsoon (Etesian) by Hippalus in 47 A. D., winds blowing regularly across the Indian Ocean which people had previously only a very vague idea, and Kushana control over the port of Barygaza (Broach) on the west coast and over Baribaricum gave an impetus to the trade. The Avadans, the Mahavastu, the Avadinasataka, and the Divyavadana, compiled by the end of the 4th century A. D, supply the evidence of trade. The Mahavastu refers to Kapilvastu as “a favourite resort of merchants and center of busy trade” and to the community of the tradesmen with their president as their head at Rajagriha.

5. TRADE REGULATIONS IN LEGAL TEXT:

The Brahmanical legal texts also contain trade regulations. The Manusmriti provides regulations regarding the sale without ownership, decline of sale and purchase, adulteration of commodities and so on. Similar regulations also occur in the law books of Yajnavalkya and Vishnu. Trade, especially with foreign countries, is a recurrent theme in Sangam literature, compiled during four centuries of Christian era. Thus, the Yavanas are frequently mentioned in the Tamil literature. The Silappadikaram, which contains valuable information on crafts, occupations, in land and foreign trade town life of the Tamils during Christian era, describes the wealth of the merchants of city of Puhar (Kaveripattanam). The Angavijja, a Jain Prakrit text, contains a detailed account of crafts and occupations, compiled in the Kushana period. This text mention five kinds of professions i.e. govt. officers, trade and commerce, agriculture and animal husbandry, arts and crafts, and work on daily wages and labour. The persons like superintending engineer, (Navakarmikah), actors (Sailakah), perfumer (Gandhika), goldsmith (Suvarnakaran), big merchants (Sethi), leader of caravans (Sarthavaha), servant or priest, clock makers (Pravarika) are mentioned in the inscriptions of Kushana.¹⁰ More clear and consolidated evidence bearing on Indian foreign trade is found in the works of the classical Graceo-Roman writers, some of whom visited India.

6. FOREIGN TRAVELLER'S ACCOUNT OF KUSHANA'S TRADE:

The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea ¹¹ (A. D. 60), the Natural history of Pliny (A. D. 77)¹², Ptolemy`s Geography (middle of the 2nd century D.)¹³, and Geography of Starbo, throw valuable light on the ports and towns of western and southern India, the items of export and import, the embassies sent to the western world as well as the routes followed by the merchants and the sailors. The discovery of the Roman coins and Mediterranean potsherds in India and the ivory statue of Laxmi, the Indian goddess of wealth, found in Pompeii (Italy), are some of the examples, which attest India`s trade with the Roman world. During the early centuries of the Christian era, a both literary and archaeological source indicates India had a flourishing trade. However, Indian sources, as compared to Greek and Latin, are deficient in many ways. Indian work did not discuss elaborately the trade routes, important ports and trading centres and the articles of trade. This lacuna is because literature of the period under discussion was religious in nature and mainly speaks of the merchant community, which made large number of donations to different religious orders. There is no Indian literary work like the Periplus or the Natural History or Ptolemy`s Geography.¹⁴ The available data gives a fair idea about the commercial activities of Indian merchants. The merchants traversed the whole of India from north to south and east to west and even traded with the Roman world in the west and the Chinese empire in the east. They carried on business with the Central Asian and the Chinese people through land routes and with the Mediterranean world through water routes. Along the commercial activities, the missionaries travelled with good will and faith to other centres. The Buddhist activity was revitalized in Egypt and Asia, and through Khotan, Buddhist travelled to China. The regional culture had spread through these routes, in the surrounding region, in art, crafts, architecture, and sculpture. The political condition of India during Christian era worked as a stimulus to the growth of trade. The unification of almost the whole of northern India under the Kushana brought about peace in the land and provided a congenial atmosphere for the growth of trade.

Kushana controlled the Indus and the Gangetic basin through which Inland trade was carried.¹⁵ The ports of the lower Indus valley offered the merchants of north-western India an opportunity for transshipment of merchandise, as the commercial centres situated in the region were connected with different parts of India but also Central Asia. Another important factor, which helped the growth of trade and use of coined money on large scale during the period, especially in north-western India.¹⁶ The credit for this goes to the Kushanas who issued a large number of gold coins for the first time in India. Goods, such as silk, spices, grains were

exported to the Roman Empire, and for its imports, it paid in gold. The Roman historian “Pliny, talks about the drains of gold it caused to Rome”¹⁷.

7. THE MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE FOR TRADE:

The medium of exchange for trade was metal coins. The literary works of the period mention three types of coins- Dinara, Purana and Karsapana. Dinara was made of gold, Purana of silver and Karsapana of copper. Archaeological excavations attest the circulation of these coins of Kushana period. The Kushana issued many gold and copper coins, which were found from many sites. Some of the important urban sites yielded the Kushana coins are Puskalavati, Taxila, Mathura, Kausambi, Patliputra, and a number of sites in the north-west frontier province, Punjab, U. P. Madhya Pradesh. One of the important factors for the flourishing trade and commerce during Kushana period and regularization of trade was various laws. The lawgiver of the period prescribes elaborate rules regarding price control, taxes, and laws of debt, partnership and other regulation as Manu mentions 18 titles of laws for traders. The king fixed the rates of all marketable commodities. The weights and measures were to be properly marked and examined in every six months. Yajnavalkya and Vishnu prescribed more or less similar laws. Vishnu imposes 1/10th and 1/20th amount of tax on commodities sold within and outside the country. Sellers and customers both had to pay a toll and those who evaded at fraudulently were to lose their goods. There is evidence to indicate that internal trade in India was in flourishing condition during the Kushana period. Traders carried raw materials and finished products from one place to another place either through land or river routes. The use of the metal coins as currency stimulated the development of trade. Specific regulations were made to protect the interests of the merchandise community as well as consumers.

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