

India's Place On Ancient Trade Routes

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1. THE PHYSICAL SETTING

India embraces a major part of the South Asian landmass and, as a geographical unit, occupies a strategic position along routes of communication between East and West. It is girdled on the northwest, north and northeast by the young folding mountain chain of the Himalayas and is washed on the southwest, south and southeast by the Indian Ocean and its two main arms, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Along the reputedly invincible 2,500-kilometer-long Himalayan wall, however, there are a number of gaps or passes, particularly in northwest (Karakoram, Burzil, Lanak La, Zoji La) and northeast (Thang La, Tulung La, Dom La, Andra La) that have served as a means for communication between India and Central Asia, Tibet and China. Similarly, the 5,700-kilometer-long seaboard, which comprises western and eastern coastal regions and forms the Indian peninsula, is endowed with numerous havens, creeks and natural ports through which seafaring trade was made possible with both East and West.

These gateways were interlinked with the hinterland by a network of routes connecting main trade centres with overland Silk Roads. The great northern route (*uttara-patha*) extended from Tamralipti (Tamluk) on the eastern seacoast up to the Oxus region, linking famous cities like Champa, Pataliputra, Kasi, Kausambi, Mathura, Sakala (Sialkot), Taxila, Prushupara (Peshawar), Kapisa (Begram) and Balkh. Another important route traversed the central Indian plateau, linking Kausambi and Mathura with Ujjayini and Bharukachha (Barygaza) on the west coast.

This paper discusses the role of India in East-West long-distance trade, particularly along the maritime route commonly called Spice Road.

2. TRADE INTERRELATIONSHIP

For any analysis of interregional trade, we must consider such factors as environmental conditions, potential for production of goods for export and potential for consumption of imported merchandise. Earliest recorded evidence of maritime trade between India and West Asia comes from the third millennium B.C.

during the period of Indus Civilization.

In this context it would perhaps be worthwhile to study the physical features of the Persian Gulf and adjoining Arabian Sea, and to remember that water transport has considerable advantages over land transport. This is especially true for bulk goods.

The coastal area of Indus Civilization extended from the plains of Gujarat, through Kathiawad, Kutch and the deltaic plains of Indus, to Makran. Hinterland regions of both Kathiawad and Kutch are rich in raw materials like copper (from southern Aravalli region), agate and carnelian (from Rajpipla), wood (from Western Ghats and Girnar), red ocher, steatite, lead-silver, shell and ivory. Coastal distribution of Harappan sites indicates marked maritime orientation, as shown by Lothal, Prabhas Somnath, Dholavira, Amra, Todio and Kuntasi. Although smaller sites may have been either refueling stations or merchant outposts for procurement of raw materials, Lothal and Dholavira seem to have been involved in long-distance trade. At the former site, occurrence of a dockyard, a warehouse and a Persian Gulf seal testify to its having been a port town. Dholavira has not yet been excavated but surface indications point to its potential for having been a big port town.

Pakistani Makran coast, generally a barren wilderness of hills and cliffs, is indented with bays and peninsulae and, as such, offers many sheltered anchorages for boats. There are three Harappan sites along this coast : Balakot, situated on the old course of the Windar in Sonmiani Bay; Sotka-koh, along the Shadi Kaur; and Sutkagen-dor, in Dasht Valley. While the latter two sites provide access to important Kej Valley, the first one leads to Las Bela plains. Location of these sites seems to be explained largely by the ocean trade route and, to a lesser extent, by trade mechanisms and interaction with the hinterland. No port town has thus far been found at or near the mouth of the Indus. This is largely because of erosion or silting. Extent of involvement of Mohenjo-Daro and other sites in Sind in external trade processes thus remains unexplained.

Most attractive places for making port along the Persian Gulf coasts for sailing vessels of the third millennium B.C. were determined by availability of sheltered anchorages, resources and sweet water. As such, Bahrain archipelago (along with the eastern province of Arabia on mainland opposite), Failaka Island and Oman on Arabian coast, and Bandar Abbas and Minab regions of Persian coast seem to have met the requirements. Sailing route was mainly along the Persian coast because, being backed by high mountains, it offers more shelter from northwesterly *shemal* than does the Arabian coast. For crossing the gulf to reach Bahrain or other places, vessels took advantage of *shemal* and *quas*, prevalent winds blowing respectively from northwest and southeast.

Numerous Sumerian and Akkadian documents of various genres, dating from Early Dynastic to Isin Larsa periods, reveal that Mesopotamia maintained communication with inhabitants of three lands, described in sequence as Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha. There are numerous references to boats laden with

merchandise from these lands coming to Ur, Lagash and Akkad. This would clearly establish that these regions were reached by way of Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. Ur Nanshe of Lagash (Early Dynastic III) refers to Dilmun boats bringing cargoes of wood. Sargon of Agade (ca 2370-2280 B.C.) mentions that ships from Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha were docked at his capital of Agade. Religious texts and lexicons of Ur III period indicate that Magan and Meluhha were sources of valuable commodities. Several texts of Isin Larsa period cite instances of tithes being paid to the Temple of Ningal at Ur by seafaring merchants after conclusion of their trips to Dilmun.

The land of Dilmun has been identified as comprising the Bahrain archipelago, islands of Failaka and Tarul and part of nearby Arabian mainland. Cuneiform inscriptions from both Failaka and Bahrain support this identification. It is favorably positioned, both geographically and strategically, on the popular maritime trade route connecting Mesopotamia and Indus Valley. The reason for its importance was its role as a watering station. It was blessed with sweet water—water that God Enki, ruler and guardian of *ab zu*, had caused to spring forth. According to textual evidence, the following items came to Ur from Dilmun: carnelian, semiprecious stones, ivory objects, lapis lazuli, copper, silver, red gold, corals, various woods and dates. Excepting perhaps dates, the main commodity of Dilmun-Ur trade among these seems to have originated in India, Oman or Iran. Occurrence in Bahrain and Failaka of lapis lazuli gaming pieces, and lapis pendants, worked ivory pieces, polished stone weights and button seals amply demonstrates the role of Dilmun as entrepot in this trade.

(Button seals, or Persian Gulf seals, discovered at the two sites include a few bearing Indus pictographs closely resembling those found at Lothal and Mohenjodaro. This premise about Dilmun's role is further reinforced by recent excavations of burial chambers in Bahrain that have yielded, among other objects, a circular seal bearing unmistakable Indus characters. These characters have the same sequence of letters as those found on seals from Mohenjo-Daro and other sites in the Indus valley.)

Magan or Makan has been identified with Oman and Umm-an-Nar near Abu Dhabi, in southeastern Iran, including possibly Makran. It is called a land of mines. Texts mention the following materials as having come from Magan: timber, reed, wood, onion, diorite, stone vases, carnelian beads, copper, ivory, gold dust and goats. Of these, at least two, ivory and carnelian beads, could have originated in India; Magan only transhipped them. Recent archaeological findings at Mayasar I and Hili have furnished supportive evidence including triangularly prismatic and pear-shaped seals, Indus-type decorative patterns on pottery and rich sources of copper and chlorite. This indicates link between Indus Valley civilization and Oman in the chain of maritime trade through the Persian Gulf. Moreover, very useful evidence has been obtained concerning early smelting processes of copper in the form of earthenware crucibles.

Sequentially, Meluhha is thus identified with regions farther east, including

areas covered by Indus Civilization. Meluhha is reported to have supplied the following to Mesopotamia : timber and other forms of wood, copper, gold dust, lapis lazuli, carnelian, wooden furniture, ivory figurines of birds, peacock and red dog. All of these, with exception of lapis lazuli, must have originated in India. In texts of late second and first millennium B.C., Meluhha represented Nubia or Ethiopia. It thus appears that these names were in course of time transferred to a different region, largely because the latter region had begun to supply some of the same materials (for example, ivory and gold) as had been obtained from original Meluhha. Shift in trade from Indian subcontinent to eastern part of Africa came about as result of decline of Indus Civilization.

Items of trade reportedly traveling from Mesopotamia to India were principally food grains, oils, wools and textiles. As these are all perishable, not much evidence remains at sites in India. Nevertheless, there are sufficient examples to indicate Mesopotamian contacts with Indus Civilization resulting from the above-mentioned maritime trade. The following are artifactual evidence of contacts : Seals in Indus style, etched carnelian beads, kidney-shaped pieces of inlay made of bone, various objects of ivory, cubed dice, depiction of Indus trefoil patterns on bull figurines from Ur, Indus bulls with manger and lapis lazuli amulets incised with two elephant figures at various sites in Mesopotamia and Elam; Sumerian stylistic features on a stone head at Dabarkot and on figurines at Mohenjo-Daro, pottery bearing knobs in barbotine, pyxis of greenish gray stone, metal spiral pins, leaf-shaped knives, bun-shaped copper ingots and Mesopotamian style mythological heroes on Harappan seals at sites on Indo-Pak subcontinent. From the foregoing, it can be seen that the number of objects found in each region is small and, as such, implies less sizable scale of trade in manufactured items. India's main items of export trade during this period would have been timber and other forms of wood, ivory, carnelian and other semiprecious stones and perhaps gold.

Second millennium B.C. was a time of upheaval, resulting in disruption of long-established contacts. It was not until the second half of first millennium B.C. that international maritime communications were resumed in the Indian Ocean, largely thanks to unifying political activities of Achaemenid kings, Alexander the Great and subsequently Romans. Expeditions of Darius and Alexander the Great by sea from the Indus Valley to Egypt and the head of the Persian Gulf did not result in any trade between these two regions. Meanwhile, south Arabians, Greeks and Romans were succeeding with the Red Sea route. Expansion of Alexandria on the Mediterranean stimulated Red Sea trade along Arabia's west coast by both land and sea. Until about 100 B.C., this trade largely rested with southwest Arabia. Around this time, two important changes in the pattern of trade took place : Hellenist King Ptolemy VII of Egypt began to encourage his merchants to sail directly between Egypt and India, avoiding southwest Arabian ports, and a Greek called Hippalus introduced the idea of sailing directly across the Indian Ocean to India, following the seasonal path of southwestern monsoons.

This was one of history's great periods of peace and stability, during which five great states were solidly established—Imperial Rome, Kushan empire in northern India, Satvahanas in southern India, Han dynasty in China and Parthian empire in Persia. Detailed account of Roman enterprise on the Indian subcontinent is available in *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, whose general accuracy is unimpeachable. Periplus also mentions Hippalus. Without his discovery, or at least popularization of, the monsoon route as a dependable guide to deep-sea voyaging, regular trade with India would have remained untenable. Apart from being long and tedious, coastwise route was fraught with piracy. Dates of Hippalus' life are not known with a measure of certainty, but he seems to have lived a considerable time before the third quarter of first century A.D., to which the date of composition of *Periplus* may be assigned.

It is also believed that Arab middlemen or their Indian agents knew the monsoon route long before it became familiar to shipping companies of Rome and Alexandria. Periplus mentions various ports around the coasts of India and Sri Lanka, from Indus to Ganges, and makes distinction between lawful market (*nomimon emporion*) and privileged market (*ethesmon emporion*). It gives vivid account of trading at each port. By and large, Indian exports included herbs, ivory, tortoise shell, semiprecious stones, gems, fine pearls, muslin, silk cloth, spices and purple-dyed cotton. Imports included copper, tin, lead, wine, thin clothing, glass, antimony, topaz, and gold and silver coins. This trade is generally known in the West as Spice Trade.

Periplus divides Roman trade with India into two categories : Terminal trade, involving goods produced on the subcontinent, and transit trade, involving goods in Indian markets that had come from farther afield. Silk, part of transit trade, found its way circuitously from China by way of the east coast of India to Malabar coast ports, where it was traded and taken more directly to the West on one of the monsoon routes. Material evidence of Roman trade is offered by impressively abundant amounts of Roman coinage still found on the Indian peninsula and in Sri Lanka. Preponderance of these Roman coins in southern India came to be there because of an economic curiosity. These coins were employed, not as currency but as bullion to be weighed out in exchange for goods. In the whole of peninsular India, there was no native currency of gold or silver to be exchanged for coin. It naturally follows that they usually have been discovered in hoards. On the Indian side, Tamil *Sangam* literature ascribable to at least second century A.D. is replete with references to trade of the *Yavanas* or "Greeks".

Excavation at Arikamedu, about four kilometers south of Pondicherry, yielded shards of Italian red-glazed Arretine ware and of amphorae from the Mediterranean together with a fragment of a Roman lamp, Greco-Roman gem and an untrimmed crystal intaglio, representing cupid and bird. Structural remains consisted of a warehouse and courtyards walled with brick and timber, containing tanks and cisterns, wells and soaking pits. These were perhaps intended for dyeing textiles, which *Periplus* mentions as an export of the region. It is reasonable to

conclude that this was the *Poduke* of the *Periplus* and *Poduke emporion* of Ptolemy. In Sri Lanka a similar potential trading station is under excavation at Mantai in Gulf of Mannar. Another distinctive ceramic associated with Roman pottery was rouletted ware, represented by flat-bottomed dishes bearing concentric rings of rouletting on the inner surface of the base. The dish form doubtlessly is of Indian origin, while rouletting technique may have been inspired from outside India. Rouletted ware is widely distributed in southern and central India and has come to be used in dating associated cultures. Outside India it has been found at many sites in Sri Lanka and at a few sites both on the Malayan peninsula and near the Red Sea. Obviously, it traveled with Indo-Roman trade to these places.

Other objects of Roman origin giving evidence of occasional direct and indirect contact include a bronze statuette of Neptune (Poseidon) and jug from Kolhapur, bronze handle of similar jug from Akota and cameo of exuberant postclassical workmanship from Karvan.

Evidence of Roman trade with the Far East is rather sketchy. Even *Periplus* did not contain much concerning it. Roman or post-Imperial wares, particularly glass, have been found from time to time in China and in southeastern Korea. It is not yet clear whether such objects came by way of India rather than through direct contact with the West. By the second century A.D., Antonine coins appear to have reached Long Shuyen and the Mekong delta of what is now Vietnam.

As result of the economic decline in the Mediterranean at about 200 A.D., the scale of Roman trade began to shrink considerably. With this diminished volume, trade around Indian Ocean became localized. In about 225 A.D., Sasanians succeeded Parthians and began to encourage sea traffic on Persian Gulf, with a view to diverting Indian Ocean trade from the Red Sea. By mid-fourth century A.D., the capital of the Roman Empire had been transferred from Rome to Byzantium. This resulted in a slump in the Indian Ocean trade in general and spice trade in particular. Most easterly outpost of Greco-Roman merchants became Aden. By the sixth century A.D., Red Sea trade was revived, with silk the main export from the East. Sri Lanka became the major entrepot of the Indian Ocean, bypassing Indian peninsula—a historical incident that explains the absence of Byzantine influence from contemporary Indian cultures. India intensified its commercial activity with Southeast Asia from the fourth century onward. Tin imported from the Malayan archipelago, for example, was used for making bronze statues in southern India.

From seventh century onward (with the revelation of Islam), Arabs and Chinese took up high-seas trade, linking them to India and Sri Lanka. Chinese exports included jade, ceramics, celadon and silk—with ceramics perhaps used only as ballast. Arabs exported glass (Assyrian), daggers, incense, horses and dates, the latter also used as ballast. It was at this time that Sri Lanka and the Malay archipelago became partners in spice trade. Later tea, rubber and coffee joined the list of goods. The Chinese ships sailed as far west as Sri Lanka. There is no direct evidence of their reaching Persian Gulf, while Arabian ships were sailing all the way

from the mouth of the gulf to China. Accounts of Arab trade were given by various writers including Ibn Batuta, Masaudi, Idris, Yakut and Marco Polo.

3. MOVEMENT OF IDEAS

With loss of the till-then flourishing trade with the Mediterranean world and Persian Gulf areas, Indian merchants followed the trail of Roman trade and expanded their contacts with the eastern world. These were more cultural than economic at first, but they did result in diffusion of ideas including religion. Chinese legends speak of the appearance of Indian Buddhist missionaries in China in 217 B.C. Buddhism was introduced to the Chinese court by Kashyapa Matanga, who arrived at the imperial court in 85 A.D. with a cargo of sacred texts and relics and with an invitation to Emperor Mingti of Han dynasty. This resulted in exchange of scholars and translation of Sanskrit literature into Chinese, of which sixteen hundred texts represent *Tripataka*. The visit to India of Fa Hsien and Huen Tsang needs no overstressing. Flow of Indian pilgrims to China increased during Sung period (ca 960-1279).

Indian influence is seen in Buddhist statuary of Tien-Lung Shan in Shansi province and of Nan Hsing-Tang in Honan. One of the greatest religious factors in transformation of Chinese life and thought was emergence of *Dhyan* school of Buddhism, which had much in common with the esoteric form of Mahayana Buddhism. Regarding material remains of Chinese contacts with India, mention may be made of Chinese coins and ceramics, including celadon ware, at many sites in India, attesting to continuity of commercial relationship until Mogul times.

Buddhism traveled to Sri Lanka when Emperor Asoka sent his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to the island. A shoot of Bodhi tree at Bodh-gaya was planted at Anuradhapura. Indo-Sri Lankan cultural interrelationship is best exemplified by works of Buddhaghosha, who arrived in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Mahanaman (ca 412-34 A.D.) and wrote commentaries of Pali canons. Monuments at Anuradhapura and Polonaruva and paintings at Sigiriya reflect Indian influence. Among material remains are occurrences of megalithic culture and rouletted ware at sites on Jaffna peninsula.

Indian cultural traditions, including religion and art, started reaching Southeast Asia by about fourth century A.D. and continued until thirteenth century, as reflected in both Brahmanic and Buddhist temples in Thailand, Kampuchia (Angkor Wat) and Indonesia (Borobudur, Parambanam). Medieval Indian Sanskrit literature refers to frequent voyages by rich merchants and daring seamen who sailed from Indian ports on commercial missions to *Yava-dvipa* (Java), *Kataha dvipa* (Kadaram or Keda on the Malayan peninsula) and *Malaya dvipa* or *Suvarna dvipa* (Sumatra).

Geographical names in many countries where Indian culture spread also exhibit Indian influence. Because Sanskrit or Pali became the language of administration and culture, it is only natural that a large number of Southeast Asian localities bear

Indian names or at least have Indian names side by side with indigenous names. Examples include Gandhara, Videha, Mithila, Kausambi, Lavapuri, Dvaravati, Ayodhya in Thailand and Kampuchea and Ujjayini and Nalanda in Sri Lanka. In Bali, streams are named after famous Indian rivers like Ganga, Sindhu, Yamuna, Kaveri, Sarayu and Narmada.

Similarly, it was Arabian commercial activities that brought Islam to Sind in eighth century and to Indonesia in eleventh century. In the same way, one can link early introduction of Christianity to India with the sailing of Saint Thomas to India.

4. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing account, it is apparent that East-West maritime trade was effective only from the beginning of Christian era, when the Romans learned to cross high seas with aid of monsoon winds. Before that it was largely coastwise trade that linked the Indian subcontinent with West Asia, particularly Mesopotamia, Elam and the Arabian plateau by way of the Persian Gulf. This coastal trade, operating in second and third millennium B.C., was neither large nor direct, being limited to entrepots in the Gulf itself. Such limited exchanges were made possible only because of prosperity and availability of resource materials for exchange in one region (like Sind, Gujarat and Oman) and high subsistence productivity in another (like Mesopotamia). Functions of the entrepot (like Barbar culture) were concerned largely with exchange value rather than use value. Under these circumstances, Harappans emerged as exporters of timber, copper, gold, ivory, stones and beads—but not importers. Eclipse of this maritime trade, and with it collapse of Harappan urban system, was caused by marked fall in agricultural production in southern Mesopotamia because of silting and salinization. Another factor in decline of this coastal trade was, I think, Mesopotamia's increased reliance in second millennium B.C., on Syria and Anatolia as sources of metals and timber, making Euphrates a more economic trade route than the long pull from India.

Pattern of trade in the first four centuries of the Christian era is different from what followed, both in terms of region covered and content. The first centuries show the acquisitive arm of Imperial Rome. Amber, ivory, pepper, incense and silk were then mainstays of Roman long-range trade. Into this was gradually fed a miscellany of other goods—pearls, semiprecious stones, tortoise shells, muslin and spices—that varied from place to place. This trade, however, had no enduring influence as social or cultural stimulus in southern India, which had more extensive contacts with other cultures. Only in the north (Pakistan), do we find fruitful contact between West and East in the form of Gandharan school of art. Contrary to this pattern was the pervasive influence of Indian cultural traditions in China and Southeast Asia as result of commercial activities of fifth to thirteenth century A.D.

After the fifth century, long-distance maritime trade was largely in hands of

Arabs and Chinese. It operated on much larger scale and was better organized, with various ports of call and entrepots. Moreover, it involved bigger ships and better knowledge of sea routes, circumnavigating the Indian peninsula and crossing of the Strait of Malacca.

