COMMERCE OF THE MAURYA PERIOD

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The Greek sources and the Arthaśāstra of Kautalya are mines of information regarding the commercial activities of the Maurya period.

The Maurya Empire was one of the biggest Empires known to Indian History, and there was a large volume of trade not only from province to province within the Empire but also with the western world. To regulate trade and commerce, there was a department of state. According to Kautalya, the Mauryan Kings themselves carried on large commercial transactions.¹

The Water-Ways.—The main water-ways as in modern times were the Indus with her tributaries in the Punjab; the Jumna and the Ganges with their branches in the heart of India. The mention of ‘Suvarṇa-bhūmi’ by Kautalya leads us to the conclusion that a large volume of trade passed between India and Burma, perhaps through the Irrawadi. As to South India and the Deccan, the navigable rivers must have been the natural water-ways.

Kautalya calls these water-ways as ‘Nadipatha’. These water-ways were strictly controlled. Passports were issued by a superintendent so that there might be a check on the smuggling of goods. Besides the Nāḍāhyaksha punished traders attempting to cross the rivers at unusual times and at unprescribed places. A fine of 26½ panas was imposed upon them.² But this restriction did not bind the suppliers to the army and the police officers following criminals. The Superintendent was empowered to arrest all those traders and merchants, having no passports with them.

Land Routes.—There was a flourishing trade through land also. The fine system of roads constructed by the Mauryan Public Works Department has been graphically described by the Greek envoy, Megasthenes. No doubt these roads facilitated trade and commerce. They are called by Chanakya ‘Vanikapatha’. P. Banerjee mentions in this connection a caravan route to Egypt from India, passing through Persia.³

¹ Kautalya’s Arthaśāstra, p. 118.
² Ibid., p. 158.
³ Public Administration, P. Banerjee, p. 256.
It appears that there was also a northern route running to Tibet. Pataliputra, the imperial capital was connected with the frontier of the Empire. As Rawlinson says this grand trunk road was constructed in eight stages. This road was connected with Taxila, the greatest trading and University centre of the Mauryan Empire. It passed through other centres of commerce like Hastinapura, Kanouj and Prayag. Dr. F. W. Thomas observes that this road was used for the conveyance of troops, but the road was also used for the purposes of commerce. Thus this grand trunk road connected and passed through some of the commercial towns of the Maurya Empire.

Commercial and Market Towns

Greek writers mention that at the time of Alexander’s invasion there were 2,000 towns in the Punjab. The author of the Arthashastra enjoins the Mauryan Emperors to found market towns (Panja Pattana). The Mauryan Empire was divided into four provinces and their capital cities of Taxila, Ujjain, Tosali, and Suvarnagiri, must have been great commercial cities and that Bhaarucaccha and Tamralipti were good examples of sea-port towns. Pataliputra, “The City of Flowers,” was a great commercial city. According to Megasthenes there was a board to supervise over the large number of markets that the city had. The markets probably drew their perennial supply from the neighbouring areas. Of all the commercial cities, Taxila seems to have been the most wealthy in the north. This city was famous for its learning, and remained an important trading centre even up to the days of Hieun Tsiang. Cunningham speaks of the wealth of Taxila thus: “At the time of Asoka’s succession the wealth of Taxila is said to have amounted to 36 kotis or 360 millions of some unnamed currency, which even if it was the silver tanka, would have amounted to 9 crores of rupees or £ 9,000,000.

Localisation of Industries

The manufacture of Woollen blankets and carpets was localised in Nepal. Kautalya calls these “Bhingisi” and ‘Apasarakas,’ and says that these were rain-proof. He also enumerates some other ten varieties of woollen blankets.

Bengal was the centre for the manufacture of fine silk fabrics, as indicated by the word ‘Vangaka’ of Kautalya. Similarly ‘Paundraka’ points to the fact that the Pandya country was also famous for muslin

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5 *Ancient Geography of India*, Cunningham, p. 106.
cloth. According to the author of the *Arthasastra*, they were as soft as they could have been.

Benares was another great centre of the textile industry. Madura in the south was well known for the production of cotton fabrics and it continued to be so even to the days of Hieun Tsiang. Kalinga, Aparânta, Bengal and Kauśambi were the other cotton manufacturing centres. Kautalya was full of admiration for the cotton fabrics of Mahiśa or Māhiśmati.

Fine cosmetics came from Suvarṇabhûmi or Burma. Kautalya gives a long list of the perfumes of Burma. Kāmarūpa was another province which exported fine scents. The name of Dwādaśa grāma or twelve villages, situated somewhere near the Himalayas should also be mentioned in this connection.

The laying of cities and towns, probably of commercial importance, started by Chandragupta Maurya was followed by Aśoka. According to Kalhana, Aśoka was the founder of Srinagara. He appears to have founded a number of towns in Nepal also. As Dr. V. A. Smith observes, “Aśoka seems to have continued the policy of his father in founding towns. He founded Lalitapatum near Katmandu in Nepal. The daughter of Aśoka, Chārumati, by name also founded a city, Devapatam, in memory of her husband Devapala.”

*Foreign Trade*

The origin of India’s foreign trade can be traced as far back as the Mohenjo Daro civilisation. Trade connections had been established with Egypt and Sumeria. Thus the foreign trade of India began as early as 30 or 40 centuries before Christ. In a large measure this was due to the position that India occupied in the oriental World. As Dr. Seal6 rightly observes, “One broad historical generalisation stands out clearly and convincingly of which all histories of world culture will do well to take note, viz., the central position of India in the Orient World for well nigh 2000 years not merely in a social, moral, spiritual or artistic reference but also and equally in respect of colonising and maritime activity and of commercial and manufacturing interests.”

One of the essential conditions for a flourishing foreign trade is the creation of convenience and comfort for foreigners and strangers. Megasthenes mentions that the Mauryan Government had created a Board at Pāṭaliputra which looked after the comforts of strangers, who were probably merchants

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coming from distant lands. Dr. R. K. Mookerjee observes, "the consequences of this vast and varied realm were no doubt, the constant stream of foreigners, travellers, visitors and envoys to and from India, and the resulting growth of elaborate regulations for their care and entertainment which were framed by the Municipal Commission under Chandragupta Maurya". The 13th Rock Edict of Asōka throws a flood of light on the foreign relations of the Maurya Empire. It mentions the Yona King, and beyond him three kings: Turamaya, Antikena and Maga. Thus the Asokan Empire had connections with Egypt, under Ptolemy Philadelphos, Syria under Antiochus, Megas of Cyrene. Macedon and Epirus were also connected with the Mauryan Empire.

A number of articles was imported from foreign countries. The mention of Chinapatta implies trade with China. Dr. Keith thinks that China had no trade connections with India as early as the Mauryan period. "The mention of China is remarkable in 300 B.C. and impossible if the name is derived from the Thasin Dynasty of 247 B.C." But Prof. Hirth is inclined to believe that this part of Canton, the cradle of foreign trade, had ever since the third century B.C. been one of the main channels of ocean commerce. Mr. R. Dikshitaw however is of opinion that China is not to be identified with China; but to be identified with Shina, a Gilgit tribe in the Himalayas and famous for the manufacture of silk. Anyway trade was evidently in a flourishing condition and a cosmopolitan crowd of merchants from various parts of Europe and Asia could be seen in the bazaars of Pātaliputra. Goods from South India, the Golden Chersonese, China, Mesopotamia and the Greek Cities of Asia Minor were exposed on the stalls at Pātaliputra. Silk, muslins, cutlery and armour, brocades, embroideries and rugs and perfumes and drugs, ivory and ivory work, jewellery and gold were the main articles in which the merchants dealt. Kautalya says that from Kapisa of Afghanistan a kind of liquor was imported. The Periplus also agrees that wine was imported to India through Barygaza. Another passage which throws much light on the foreign trade of India, during the Maurya period is seen in the following remark: "Amitro Chades (Bindusara), the king of the Indians, wrote to Antiochos asking him to buy and send him

7 History of Indian Shipnig, p. 112.
8 R. E. Hultschion.
10 Quoted by Banerjee in his India as Known to the Ancient World, p. 43.
11 Mauryan Polity, p. 7.
12 India—A Short Cultural History, by H. G. Rawlinson.
sweet wine, figs and a sophist, and Antiochus replied to him “we shall send you the figs and the wine but in Greece the law forbids a sophist to be sold”. According to the author of the Periplus Greek girls were frequently imported to Barygaza or Broach. Mr. H. G. Rawlinson informs us that during the days of the Ptolemys (274 B.C.) ivory and elephants were largely exported to Egypt. Mr. Warmington also confirms this point. “The Indian Elephant which was used frequently in war after Alexander’s conquests was first introduced to the Romans when Pyrrhus transported some from Epirus to Italy in 281 B.C. Hasdrubal at Panormus in 251 B.C. used elephants driven by Indians. So did Hannibal and Hasdrubal during the second Punic War with Rome and at the battle of Raphia Ptolemy’s Libyan beasts could not stand against the Indian troops of Antiochus.” It appears that Ptolemy Philadelphos was fond of Indian cows, Indian hunting dogs, and Indian spice. Pearls were exported from South India. Pliny also says that muslins and indigo and crystals were imported into Rome from India.

The balance of trade was always favourable to India. Pliny says “That in no year does India draw our Empire of less than 550 millions sesterces, giving back her own wares in exchange which are sold among us at fully one hundred times their cost price.” Thus, the commercial policy of the Maurya Emperors resulted in great prosperity. Kautalya states that prosperity of commerce leads to financial prosperity. Pandy, Simhala, Kerala, countries bordering the Himalayas, Vidharba, Benares, Madura, Kamarupa, Vanga, Konkana, Kalinda, Kausambi and Mahishā were the several commercial members of the empire. Kautalya says that horses from Kambojja, Sindhu, Aratta formed the best variety. Perhaps these horses were imported for the purposes of war, while the horses coming from Bahlaka and Sauvira, being of a middle quality, were probably used to draw carriages and chariots and to carry loads.

In short the exports were gems, silks, linen, muslin, cotton, rice, indigo, ivory, elephants, and spice. The imports were Greek girls, varieties of wines, glasses and spices.

In connection with the foreign trade we have to note that the Mauryan state followed the policy of giving encouragement to foreign trade as can be seen in Kautalya’s directions to the Superintendent of Commerce to show

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13 Periplus, p. 49.
14 Commerce between Roman Empire and India, Warmington.
15 Intercourse of India with the Western World, p. 151.
16 Pliny, XXXV, C. 25.
17 Quoted by S. Banerjee, India as known to the Ancient World, p. 13.
some remission of the trade taxes to those who imported foreign goods. Such an enlightened policy was bound to increase the financial stability of the Mauryan Government as it surely did.

**Commerce and the State**

The state collected a boundary tax (varāni), through the (antarālas) boundary officers, on all foreign goods, entering the country. It again collected at the toll house a duty (śulkā). The state directed the commercial policy in two ways.

Firstly, there seems to have been the operation of protection. This can be seen in the collection of the compensation money or Vaidharāṇa by the state. This was a protective duty to save the internal trader from an excessive foreign competition.

Secondly the state forbade the importation of some articles, which it deemed undesirable and injurious. A very heavy fine was not only imposed if they were imported, but the commodity was also confiscated. The forbidden articles were weapons, mail armour, metals, precious stones, grains, cattle and chariots. Weapons, mail armour and chariots were prohibited probably because the Mauryan state thought that these were injurious to the peace and stability of the Empire itself. The attitude of the state in forbidding the importation of grains and cattle cannot be well explained. Perhaps this policy was followed to save the local dealers from outside competition. This policy of the state further gives the clue that the largest exports of Mauryan India were as it is even now, grains and cattle.