

A look at how the Mauryas excelled in sea-borne foreign trade



Sanchi Stupa built during the Mauryan age

Sea trade began during the latter half of the Mauryan period. In addition to focusing on exports and imports, the Mauryan rulers engaged in the shipbuilding business and hired them out to merchants for commercial purposes.

A careful look at some of the most ancient kingdoms in India would reveal a hint of their focus on trade across continents through the sea. Ancient textbooks penned by pilgrims or seals and sculptures say a lot about how the Mauryan empire founded in 322 BCE by Chandragupta Maurya maintained friendly relations with the Hellenistic powers by virtue of trade. While the land routes, (the northern one passing through Bactria and southern through Gedrosia and Carmania, Persia and Susiana) facilitated commercial relations between the West Asia and India, a large part of the trade was carried out by the sea route (through Gerrha on the west coast) of the Persian Gulf.

Hints of maritime trade under the Mauryas

The Arthashastra written by Kautilya (also known as Chanakya, c. 350-275 BCE) includes details of construction and security of trade routes during those times in addition to recommending guidelines regarding the appointment the Superintendent of Shipping, Port Commissioner, Superintendent of Commerce, Superintendent of Tolls, etc. These port officials were entrusted with duties to carry out seamless trade, which also involved punishing anyone found to violate the trade rules and regulations. Megasthenes, an ancient Greek explorer reputed for his writings on India in his famous book "Indika", confirmed the existence of shipbuilding industry in those times. His reference to the state controlling and administering the shipbuilding industry indicates flourishing maritime trade during the Mauryan period.

Goods and ideas moved via sea

Trade has been the linchpin of prosperity across time under the various Mauryan rulers. While the inland trade routes serving as the arteries of any prosperous kingdom enhanced communication and trade among people of various states, the sea routes serving as the mainstay of the kingdom's commercial activities were ubiquitous in their use and reference in many literary texts and travelogues written by foreign envoys who had visited India during those days.

Traders during those times had also preferred sea routes over their land counterparts. This is because maritime trade cost less in terms of transport apart from saving time. While explaining the benefits of trade via the sea route in contrast to the land route, Kautilya in Arthashastra elucidates how the sea and river routes were cheaper than the land routes. However, fear of storms and attacks by pirates limited sea trade. Moreover, traders travelling through sea routes faced inherent difficulties like shipwrecks and sea dangers as the ships built during those times were not strong enough to withstand the damage caused by hurricanes and other natural calamities. Traders then found solace in coastal sea routes mainly due to the existence of ports on these routes, thereby, allowing greater scope for sale and purchase of goods.

Exports and imports

The West Asian countries highly valued Indian timber and other items of use like bamboo, dyes, food grains, ivory, tortoise shells, pearls, rice, medicinal substances, etc. Besides, exports included a variety of livestock like hunting dogs, elephants, peacocks, parrots, maina, pheasants and snakes. In addition, West Asian countries imported items like spices, vegetable products, silk, textiles, Indian copal, indigo, lac, etc. Imports by Indian kings were comparatively lower in number than exports. Import items included fruits, beverages, wines, crude glass, asphalt and antimony, etc., thus, highlighting the balance of trade was in favour of the Mauryan rulers. References to the import of foreign liquors and wines have been found in the Arthashastra that refers to foreign customers in liquor shops.

Though there is not enough material to support India's overseas and international markets, historical texts refer to India's commercial ventures being extended to foreign countries like Assyria, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Parthia and Persia, etc.

The Mauryan empire, one of the most well-known empires during those times relied on trade for its prosperity and maintenance of armed forces. While a lot is unknown about the Mauryan trade systems, their focus on maritime trade to maintain external relations underscores the opulence and wealth synonymous with its rule.

